ROAD MOVIES AND GAS STATIONS:
MONICA STAMBRINI' *BENZINA*
AS CREATION OF ALTERNATIVE SPACES

STEFANIA LUCAMANTE

*S'il est difficile de vivre, il devient de plus en plus
impossible et inefficace de mourir*
(Artaud)

Every cubic inch of space is a miracle
(Whitman)

Summary: Both the novel and the film *Benzina* think of the literary and the visual as contesting sites for women. In revisiting the fields of space within a capitalist society and the struggle for representation of sexual identity, these two works successfully deploy strategies where the visual narrative—literary and cinematic—confirms its ability to be a place in which subjects try out distinct possibilities of their existential corporeality. Rather than presenting crystallized subjectivities, these works analyze the attempts a lesbian couple makes at finding their place within a social system still fraught by stereotypization of gender roles. This article examines how *Benzina's* cinematic adaptation convincingly extricates representations of the protagonists' struggle in Italian society. The idea of a feminist geometry, a triangle whose theorem is of a problematic nature, at once social and personal of arduous solution was prompted by my memory of American painter Ed Ruscha's diagonal compositions entitled *Gas Stations*.

The Novel

1998: Elena Stancanelli's *Benzina*¹ overtly represents lesbian practices of love while stating the lack of acceptance of such relations in Italian contemporary society. Monica Stambrini's eponymous cinematic adaptation of 2002 further elaborates the issues presented in Stancanelli's novel and yields to the visual quality of *Benzina's* narrative. Critical attention, though

¹ *Benzina* also enjoyed a theatrical staging in 2001. See Saverio Aversa's review of the play which was directed by Daniele Falleri, and presented at the *Teatro del Garofano* in Rome. (<http://www.gayroma.it/culture/cinematatro/ci-18giugno2001.htm>).

of a mixed and even contradictory nature, was given primarily to Stambrini's film,² while the novel did not receive much critical study. In fact, it was rather quickly dismissed and it has been only in the past few years that it has gained some consideration with Charlotte Ross's and Patrizia Sambuco's studies dealing respectively with Pierre Bourdieu's theories on bourgeoisie and social *habitus* and the theme of the mother-daughter relationship.³

The strong visual matrix led critics to associate Stancanelli's short novel to the writings of the authors which, at the time, were conveniently grouped by Italian media and press under the generic umbrella denomination of *Giovani Cannibali*. The reasons for such critical assimilation lie primarily in the coinciding period of publication, as 1998 was the year in which then-dubbed *Cannibali* writers Aldo Nove published *Superwoodbinda*, Isabella Santacroce *Luminal*, and Tiziano Scarpa *Amore@*. The alienating setting that denounces familism as one of the most strenuous problems in Italian society, in sharp contrast to the stereotype on Italian strong family values, also contributed to the critical reflections of the time that considered *Benzina* as another example of *Cannibali* writings. Also the splattering effects these writers utilized in all these narratives of social (if not political) distress played a key role in Stancanelli's novel critical assimilation to the *Giovani Cannibali*. Indeed, all these aspects combined are

² Most of the reviews that have appeared after its release and participation to several film festivals, compared Stambrini's first feature film *Benzina* (*Gasoline*) virtually to all the movies in which two women (often lesbian) face society and deal with patriarchal violence in order to defend love and kinship. From the classic *Thelma and Louise* to *Heavenly Creatures*, from *Boys don't Cry* to *Wild at Heart* and *Butterfly Kiss*, *Benzina* has been consistently comprised within the two-women movie or women's road movie subgenre. With the notable exception of Gabriel Francioni and Andrea De Candido's acute comments, (<http://www.kinematrix.net/torino2001/benzinarece.htm>), Italian critics seemed relatively "unprepared" to discuss a cinematic adaptation by an Italian female director with two lesbians as main characters (see Roberto Nencioni, <http://it.movies.yahoo.com/7/7/41207.html>). Instead of liquidating *Benzina* because of splatter effects, American and British reviewers have underscored the innovative notion of the visual in the construction of this film. Such critical divergence is generated partly by the existence of feminist film theory which allows for more ponderous weighing of films by women directors.

³ An exception are Charlotte Ross's "Queering the *Habitus*: Lesbian Identity in Stancanelli's *Benzina*" a brilliant study of Bourdieu's concept, and Patrizia Sambuco's insightful "Women, Relationships and Space in Stancanelli's *Benzina* (1998).

quite relevant in Stancanelli's novel. But, in fact, the use of splatter in the novel *Benzina* is only deceptively close to the pulp scenes which gave notoriety (not for the right reasons) to Aldo Nove and Niccolò Ammaniti—after all the literary case of the mid-Nineties. Splattering effects construct a dissimilar kind of imagery and relative interpretation in Stancanelli's novel, for what is underscored here is not a generic displacement of individuals in society, but a particular one, the evident dislocation of the lesbian couple protagonist of the story in the tight weave of Italian society. Nove's characters are alienated spectators of a consumer-oriented society and their existential queries belong in a more universal order of alienation that finds no specific relations to gender societal construction nor to the desire to modify them according to non-normative identities. Similarly, though symptomatic of a societal malaise, Ammaniti's boys remain on the other side of the Italian social 'barricade,' for they re-affirm the current Italian neo-conservatism in all aspects of their existence—even in their 'evening' (permitted) transgression.

Stancanelli's short novel reveals scopes and effects other than those expressed in the *Cannibali* works. The focus here is on the desire to freely express a form of subjectivity—a 'different' sexual identity—that Italian society, still today, fails to fully acknowledge and accept. Since the notion of a troubled gender does not enter the equation of societal mutations, Italian society also fails to 'make space' for those gender-perturbed women who "don't fit" the polarization and the construction of a gendered identity that still dictates the norm. At the core of the novel, there lies the need for a better integration of those individuals whose aspiration is a peaceful shared living. In contrast to the characters in Ammaniti's stories, the young women of *Benzina* become visible only as 'others' from society, hence providing readers with a rather different point of view. Their characterization illustrates at once the constrictions of the stereotypical bourgeois girl and of the working girl, Lenni and Stella respectively, while also deconstructing and problematizing another precarious binary stereotype, the lesbian couple butch/femme, in which often Italian media and mass culture seem to depict lesbians as a way to proscribe them from normative life.

More to the point, Stancanelli's *Benzina* is permeated with the desire to read (lesbian) sexual identity as a non-restrictive and a non-normative one that could allow for women to inhabit social spaces in less rigidly conformed typologies. For instance, splattering effects here depict the cold-blooded attitude of Lenni and Stella toward the mother and toward the three-some that comes to trouble their—until then—quiet world. The mother as the three-some (in the film two men and a woman, not only

men) whose relation to each other remains unclear, are all members of the society that outcasts Lenni and Stella.

The novel succeeds in providing spectators with the motives behind the crime that opens the story like in a noir. *Benzina's* dialogic use of dead characters reminds of theatrical and cinematic effects—reveals at once the influence of Antonin Artaud's *Suppôts et supplications* and *Sunset Boulevard's* dead narrator—while simultaneously reminding readers familiar with the notion of the Kristevian *abject* of its unquestionable visual dramatic powers.⁴ The representation of a 'different' kind of youth and response to bourgeois life style focuses on one couple and on the mother of one of these two women. This is a strange ménage-à-trois where the dead character⁵ takes on the same importance, if not more, than the two who are alive.

FROM THE NOVEL TO THE FILM

Writer Elena Stancanelli co-wrote the script for the film with director Monica Stambrini, openly approving how Stambrini transposed *Benzina* on the screen. Indeed, the novel and the film substantiate each other at catching the essence of gazing at what it's difficult to stare at, a corporeal space, that is, that cannot be situated within the norm, within regulatory

⁴ "The abject confronts us [...] with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm—in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or her husband stands for—is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. The child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn. In such close combat, the symbolic light that a third party eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself Ab-jecting" (Kristeva 13).

⁵ Alice Sebold is another writer who seems fascinated by topics and techniques that strikingly resemble Stambrini's. Both *The Lovely Bones* and the recent *The Almost Moon*, openly deal with the impossibility at being heard of dead female characters who speak only through their posthumous narration of the events that caused their death.

geographic and topographic spaces. The essence of both works is as pervasive as the actual gasoline. Gasoline is a thick, incendiary fluid used as metaphor to explore the relationship between the visual effects of the novel⁶ and the literary effects of the film, the latter revisiting preexisting imagery of alienation, isolation, suburban squalor and queer cinema.⁷

In Stambrini's film, the so-called transgression and the transversality of lesbian love are narrativized and organized according to a subjective space which suggests at once the characters' failure to achieve such space in a society such as the Italian and the possibility of a rescue from it. The geometric construction of narrative and visual diagonal lines regulating the text both in the characters' system and in the scenes and dialogues aligns much of the content of the film with Elizabeth Grosz's theoretical footsteps. This film effectively conveys the notion of a corporeal space conceived as non-universal in opposition to the normative in a rigid binary combination.⁸ Stambrini's *Benzina* critiques former dangerous figurations of lesbianism as a confined and antithetical space of discourse. Figurations of the by-now classic butch/femme dyad and the markers of female attractiveness are problematized rather than being presented in the stereotypical fashion we have come to get used to. While at this time representations of lesbian couples are not infrequent in Italian women's novels (Dacia Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* 1981; Melania Mazzucco's *Il bacio della Medusa* 1996 are just few examples) and also in films showing supporting actress-

⁶In his 1983 novel, *Benzina*, postmodern writer Quim Monzo depicts a world where all the elements abovementioned construct a world that, again like in the *Giovani Cannibali*, deals with capitalist alienation, and consumeristic nausea.

⁷Rosi Braidotti's thought about feminist practice's role today expresses the need to "overthrow the pejorative, oppressive connotations that are built not only into the notion of difference, but also into the dialectics of Self and Other [. . .] as now a She might no longer be a She, but a subject-in-progress, a mutant [. . .] a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis" (11-12).

⁸Unknown, or veiled, is in fact, what we think of women's space in many instances. In theorizing the representation of a non-"universal" corporeal, Elizabeth Grosz sees any of its previous definitions as a "veiled representation and projection of a masculine which takes itself as the unquestioned norm" (*Volatile Bodies* 188). In Grosz's view, universality of a corporeal would often imply an "ideal representative" that is per force male and heterosexual; someone who, in his representational positioning, would innocently "bring violence to its others [...] who are reduced to the role of modifications or variations of the [...] human body (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 188).

es engaged in a female dyad (i.e., Stefania Rocca and Angela Finocchiaro's couple of Cristina Comencini's *La bestia nel cuore*). Stambrini's critique purposefully tries to unearth a more expansive and meaningful approach to sexual diversity; it aims to avoid sexual polarization and the construction of an *either-or* space for her characters. It aims, more particularly, to avoid that the performing act risks becoming, once again, an agent of confinement and not of freedom for women who don't fit norms of identity construction. Indeed, the forecast of a possible "future-in-becoming"⁹ articulates the visual narrative of this lesbian couple, whose outrage at being doubted, ignored, or shamed to silence prompts their reaction, and eventually their (terrain) defeat. If we believe in an afterlife, Stambrini's characters will conquer there what they were missing on Earth.

In Stambrini's film, issues turn out to be deeply imbedded in the very nature of the cinematic representations. Images in the film constantly try to erode assumptions about the place in which Italian society—of which Lenni's mother is a credible product in her frigidity and frantic attention for looks—wants to confine them. Images try to make us see what we don't see. With such premise, the mother-daughter relation is revisited as a non-oppositional one and is revealed in all the weaknesses and strength that love and hate bring to such a relationship, a "fierce attachment"¹⁰ that needs alternative spaces to dismiss obsolete representations of mothers and (lesbian) daughters.

BENZINA OR THE PARADOX : AN ARISTOTELIAN WORK

Stambrini did not change the plot of the novel, for events in the film chronologically unfold as in the novel. The story takes place within a twenty-four hour Aristotelian time frame. It begins on the eve of *Ferragosto*, the holiday most peculiar to Italian society as it marks the apex of the holidays

⁹ "Sexuality, pleasure, desire need not be represented only through oppositional or binarized divisions between self and other, subject and object, heterosexual and homosexual—just as ontologies need not be understood only in terms of the divisions between matter and mind, nature and culture, the biological and the psychological, the natural and the historical. While this binary structure has long been recognized as a pervasive form of containment of the subordinated term through its negative or contradictory relation to the dominant term, there are a number of strategies developed to problematize its conceptual dominance" (Grosz, *Time Travels* 6).

¹⁰ I have taken this expression from Vivian Gornik's 1987 *Fierce Attachments: A Memoir*.

and for it also celebrates—since the advent of the Roman Catholic Church—the assumption of the Blessed Mother to the Heavens. The first shot is the back of the mother—dead—on the floor of what is the main setting and contesting site of the film, the gas station. The first movie line announces what we see: “È morta!” (“she is dead”). Clear refusal for cheap suspense ensues. Spectators see a woman who is already dead, someone is watching her aside from us, and the opening statement, like in a noir, announces the crime that is (perhaps) waiting to be solved. Right after the first, very factual frame, *un crime accomplie*, the film begins with the first scene that is the product of careful editing of two different ones. The initial frantic and synthetic narrative, achieved by cross-cutting between the scene of the mother’s arrival at the gas station and the gas station *after* her arrival, which culminates in the mother’s death and subsequent attempt of Lenni and Stella to hide her body, helps spectators in understanding what lies ahead. The beginning cross-cutting situates the crime and prompts spectators to guess the reason why such an accidental crime has been committed. The sequence moves in a series of abrupt cuts between the bar that Lenni runs, adjacent to the gas station her lover Stella owns on the *raccordo anulare* (the Roman beltway) and the taxi taking a very anxious Giovanna to the gas station. In a pertinent montage between the scene of the squabble in the bar and that of Giovanna’s arrival to Fiumicino/taxi ride to the gas station, viewers witness this obsessively rhythmic part leading to the accidental matricide. Cross-cutting links at once the most significant actions in the movie that do not occur simultaneously, but that are intricately connected to one another. As in the novel, it is during the quarrel between the mother and the daughter that we learn of Lenni’s choice of her life style, her parting of three years ago from the mother and her Florentine prison house.

Extreme close-ups of Lenni’s and her mother’s faces, Giovanna’s spiked-heel shoes (red and white like the colors of her dress and her blood) and the sounds of—above all—the mother’s voice while she screams, argues, and furiously smokes are thus edited with the scenes of her arrival at the airport and later to Lenni’s bar on the *Raccordo Anulare*. Evidently, this is not the beginning of *It’s a Wonderful Life*. The supernatural element of the mother’s voice functions as a theatrical apparatus that serves well the entire plot but, as we shall see, she is not her daughter’s guardian angel, she is not Clarence Odbody who is sent to help George Bayley in his hour of need. Hers is the kind of voice that belongs to the unheard, to the women who unwittingly go on with a restrictive normative life whose rules reveal to be unclear to them as to those—daughters—they try to impose them upon.

In the bar, shots and counter-shots of mother and daughter, quite literally framed in their squabble, reveal the impending problems of the complex relationship that they still entertain with each other, even after all these years. The camera visualizes for the spectators the weight of the traumatic adolescence that still ponders upon Eleonora (as her mother calls Lenni) by shooting the actress (Regina Orioli) from above with an overhead crane. Lenni's embarrassed verbal defense cannot compete with the impetus of her mother's long-rehearsed tirade about the daughter's basic lack of compliance with the rules she has tried to teach her on how to be the perfect bourgeois woman, all about keeping a nice figure and being submissive to men's needs. It should not be overlooked that Lenni's passiveness to her mother's insults is due to the fact that, after all, Lenni only needs some money to restore the bar and the gas station, to improve those two spaces that she and her lover, Stella, occupy and make up their universe. Silent until this moment, Stella follows outside the bar with trepidation and growing anxiety what has now become a row between her lover and her lover's mother. The scene shows Stella lighting the bottom of her boots with her lighter, smoking and staying put. As the noise of the two women's altercation grows louder, Stella enters the bar to defend her lover. She slaps Giovanna who dies of a silly and accidental death falling on the bar and hitting her forehead. Lenni's mother is *unintentionally* murdered. Matricide, however grotesquely random, has been committed, and Stella's accidental act to physically defend her lover Lenni seems to fulfill the latter's unspoken desire to get rid, once and forever, of her 'mummy dearest.' The bizarre aspects of this particular scene as the unwanted crime underscore that which is not at all accidental, though: the fact that the story begins and ends precisely at Ferragosto, for this is a story that revolves around a matricide. According to Jung,

The qualities associated with [the mother archetype] are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct of impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (Jung 6: 110).

From this ambivalence of the mother archetype, from its dual nature historical examples emerge, among which that of the "Virgin Mary, who is

not only the Lord's mother, but also, according to medieval allegories, his cross." (Jung 6:110). *Benzina* deploys both aspects connected with the Jungian archetypal mother to farther its scope of making manifest Italian social asphyxia. While the Mother of all in Italian patriarchal culture ascends to Heaven, Giovanna dies and must disappear before it's too late.

Already at its outset then, the abundance of gruesome passages builds the cold rendition of the unintended matricide. However tragic, the visual effect borderlines the grotesque: the splatter effects in the two scenes edited at the beginning of the film rely on the visual sensation of thickness of Giovanna's deep red blood now running on the linoleum floor of the bar. Extreme close-ups of the blood that, ungovernable as a deep red sea, creeps into the floor while Stella's dog begins to lick it, with Lenni's vomit at the sight of her mother now dead. The camera takes a dry, almost stern approach at the scene by unsympathetically composing and presenting the shots of Giovanna's beautiful body fit in a white dress lying on the floor. Cross-cutting, in fact, accentuates a specific authorial desire to avoid empathy, to avoid identification with any of these women; rather, it dispassionately problematizes conventional notions of women's reciprocal entrustment while proposing a frankly antagonistic view of the mother-daughter which here is taken to its extreme.

BODILY FLUIDS, INORGANIC ONES

Though we know that at the core of this casual murder lies Lenni's unspoken desire—a forbidden fantasy of many abused children—to metaphorically kill her mother, a murder presented to us as a matter-of-fact event since scene one, it is precisely Giovanna's death that allows for the story to finally unroll. Lenni and Stella engage in escapist sex finding temporary comfort in each other's body: they don't know what to do, they are taking time to think what they are going to do next with that body, while blood, sugar, and the body of Giovanna lie on the floor. Within five minutes from its opening scene, though, the film makes it hardly a surprise that the dead mother will never leave her daughter and her lover alone. Even dead, a mother like Giovanna cannot conveniently be placed in any of the sites where dead people usually are put to rest. Daughters don't get rid of mothers like her. "Such waste drops so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver" Kristeva (as in Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 194) eloquently comments this scene of *Benzina* where Lenni lies on the floor near her mother's corpse. Death seen as a material fall, as the word *cadaver* comes from

cadere, thus decrees the first real connection between Giovanna and Lenni. Giovanna's blood must serve to the purification of the heroines, eliminating any superfluous pietism from the images unrolling, hence one more directorial reason for the initial cross-cutting. The frame recuperates Melanie Klein's notion that the primal mother is idealized primary narcissism and primary experience of abjection which partly informs Kristeva's theories in *Powers of Horror*. Also, "[f]or their implicit association with femininity, with maternity, with the corporeal, all elements subordinated to the privilege of the self-identical, the one, the unified, the solid" (Irigaray in Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 195), the "cultural unrepresentability" of vomit and fluids leads spectators to the proximity of the *abject* to waste fluids, which Kristeva argues to be the connotation of the relation of the individual with the maternal. Just like bodily fluids, gasoline is a liquid which "resist[s] the determination that marks solids, for they are without any shape of form of their own" (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 194). As bodily fluids are "disturbing" for their refusal to "conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity – the very notion that governs our self-representations and understanding of the body" (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 195) so is gasoline in the manner this film likens it to bodily fluids.

The stark colors of the diagonal lines that compose the frame of sex between Lenni and Stella connect symbolically the three women *and* the confined space of this struggle: the deep red of the blood on the floor matches that of Stella's shorts, while Lenni's shirt and the sugar tie in with Giovanna's draped white dress. The color of Stella's shorts is the same deep red of Giovanna's blood. Lenni's shirt is white like the sugar. The two bodies of the girls lie diagonally in a frame that concretely shows awkwardness at the display of normal emotions. Sexual pleasure, desire, and pain cohabit this non-space defined by the bar. Awkwardness at living in a world that assumes lines must be square and clear, awkwardness at living in a world that requires a clear definition for the individual and pressures non-conforming individuals within a space labeled as "transgressive." Lenni and Stella's positioning is not fluid like gas *yet*, or like Giovanna's blood, which they now have to clean. The three characters are brought together by the use of colors while they lie all on the floor, already overwhelmed as they are by the recent happenings. Images control the production of subjectivity that is thus given in all its problematic complexity. This three-some is about to approach a nowhere land. (Fig. 1)

Fig.1. Lenny Stella with Mummy's Body. *Benzina (Gasoline)*.
Courtesy of Strand Releasing.

AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH, AN ACCIDENTAL MOTHER

Giovanna's accidental matricide is indispensable for the rethinking of the three women's position within patriarchy.¹¹ With her death, Giovanna gains time and proximity to her own daughter's convictions while understanding the forced construction of her own femininity, embedded as it is in a forced definition of her gender, a societal pressure which did not permit her what is only human to aspire to, "to breath, to desire, to love and to live" (Butler 8). Freed from her beautiful clothes and placed into the trunk of the girls' car, Giovanna begins to slowly come to terms with the

¹¹ In Sambuco's view, "[t]he unpremeditated, clumsy and 'comic' murder of the mother acquires relevance in the critique of patriarchy and in the re-conceptualization of a female sense of self, which is, however, only available to the mother in the surreal dimension. Through the killing of the mother figure, as well as through the ironic depictions of the bourgeois woman, Stancanelli underlines her rejection of the maternal. Yet the mother's death allows the rebirth of a woman who uncovers a sense of self previously unknown to herself. Thanks to the death of a body framed into a patriarchal structure, a new woman, closer to other women, emerges. The mother's death has the function of distancing class distinctions and the difficulties that separated the mother from her daughter" (135).

emptiness of her arranged marriage and the vacuous Florentine *vita di società*. They are evidence of and impediment to Giovanna's interaction with her daughter based on values other than the ones she passively took for granted when she, herself, became a mother. The authorial message then, that things are all crooked, not positioned according to a Cartesian orthogonal axial system, comes across quite strikingly while this now defunct Florentine lady discusses with her daughter.

In this Artaud-inspired theatre of (absurd) cruelty, Giovanna's only redeeming grace is that, now that she is dead, she can finally hear what her daughter tried to tell her with her galloping bulimia, with her constant queasiness while living with her; that the mother's constant desire to make Lenni 'fit' the bourgeois world of Florence's mold—thus becoming Eleonora—only brought resistance and defiance as a result. The diagonal bundles of light project in space the bodies of the three protagonists while they finally see and listen to each other. Initial stereotypical hatred and incomprehension between a beautiful mummy and an ugly duckling are renegotiated in the space and time of the film, where the ironic use of Giovanna's condescending voice-over serves as commentary to the two women's clumsy lifting of her body (they place it in the trunk of the their car as in gangster movies) and to the situation that ensues altogether.

Benzina eviscerates and presents the women's triad by constructing a polyphonic emplotment based on the alternation of the three characters' point of view. The montage allows for a very clear understanding of this three-some discourse in which the dead mother is just as present as are the two women alive. Undeniably, also the composition of the frames—as in the case of the sex scene on the floor next to the mother discussed earlier—makes the complex theorem that frames these characters *and* the artist's message even more tangible.

ABOUT THREESOMES

Along with corporeal proximity, the relationship amongst the three women comes equipped with a paradoxical feeling of estrangement. Shots, frames, and panning in the film make evident *how* their issues can be perceived not only internally, through the characters' distinct points of view, but also from the outside of this intricate triangle composed by the couple, Stella and Lenni, and Eleonora-Lenni's Mother, Giovanna-Mamma. How different their issues can be when compared to those of a heterosexual couple? While in the novel some bullies come to fill the car and give trouble to the girls, in the film their triangle is juxtaposed to a heterosexual threesome. Stambrini adds the character of a woman to the bourgeois group who

engages in the deadly fight with Lenni and Stella, Pippi, as heteronormative perspective of the search for subjectivity. We watch her shooting a video of the scenes we are watching. Their struggle emblemizes that between the 'normal' world and the girls' world. This tension, initiated by the violent way in which the *ragazzi* pretend to fill their tank in spite of the fact that the gas station is closed, lasts in fact until the culminating moment of the final explosion. *Benzina* can be a "film indeciso fra il videoclip e il Dogma 95" ("a movie between a videoclip and Dogma 95") as Francesco Alò notes, when we rethink of Pippi shooting with her hand-held camera the violence to Lenni and Stella of her buddies, as her hand-held camera delivers a free-form and spontaneous style that does reminisce of Dogma 95. Pippi's visual angle composes scenes in a slow motion, amateurish way, is in no way a feminist one, but actually attests to a visual field where Lenni and Stella are perceived as perverse and estranged heroines that are destined to arouse pleasure. Spectators—such as the threesome arriving to the station—are made thus visible to us, the actual spectators. In Stambrini's addition, the heterosexual threesome exposes the confusion that can exist also between couples considered "normal" vis-à-vis the ones—as Lenni and Stella's—that are labeled as "transgressive." The laws of heteronormativity do not necessarily guarantee a "normal" existence, spectators are told. Spectators, placed as receivers and evaluators of the visual and literal explosion of negative societal forces leading to the end of the story of the three main characters (or the beginning of a better one), are left with the awareness that, far from creating a stale version of *Thelma and Louise*, Stambrini's visual narrative deconstructs and recomposes the strategies and themes of the women's anti-road movie, already in itself a deconstruction of the classic road movie (Laderman). Stambrini's aesthetic approach appears "dictated by an entire set of beliefs and desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses" (Rogoff 22) but it is applied so that it debunks previous representations of lesbian movies *and ménages-à-trois*.¹²

THE DIAGONAL LIGHTS OF HOLLYWOOD: ABOUT GAS STATIONS

In his condescending review, Bill Chambers bills Stambrini's *Benzina* as a "Hollywood movie."¹³ He is correct, but for reasons others than those he

¹² The external triangle's French car, a Renault, betrays Stambrini's fascination with François Truffaut's 1962 adaptation of *Jules and Jim*'s triangle, another film adapted from a novel that ends with the death of the characters by falling from a bridge by car.

¹³ "That lack of identity extends to her tasteful visuals, her view of lesbians as lip-

suggests. To negotiate the problematic discourse of lesbian love and motherly discursive constructs Stambrini's *Benzina* draws her visual inspiration from several California-based sources. David Lynch's films come to mind right away. But what we need to list, instead, are the items by which Stambrini capsizes the Hollywood female road movie genre. In other words, how does this Italian director problematize the women's road movie?

Stambrini's film delegitimizes the palpable societal reasons of revenge, the chain of violence that engenders more violence behind the death of the American heroines Thelma and Louise. Her film offers a kind of cathartic death that positively redeems Lenni and Stella from the bourgeois world and from the sense of estrangement where the bourgeois *habitus* had confined them. The spectacle we are witnessing appears here in all its disturbing force. *Benzina* makes of violence, love, and solidarity between women a much more nuanced and subtle business than its American and even Australian predecessors. Displacement takes place on multiple levels, most notably the gas station run by two women; the notion of "static runaway;" and gas that takes on *full* meaning as a tool to escape from reality. Finally, the notion of transversal lines of love that do not confide in trite references to lesbian singers such as Sinead O'Connor's or Gianna Nannini's tunes (as it happens alas in the novel) provide spectators with powerful points of visual reference and interpretation. In *Benzina*, gasoline is deceptively seen as the device for such escape from reality, only to become later that liquid essence which annihilates and destroys the aspirations to freedom of the couple. In short, gasoline fuels no escape, it drives them nowhere.

FUGA STATICA: AN OXYMORON

As script co-writer and director Stambrini claims, the basic idea of the movie was however the static runaway, or *la fuga statica* (Stambrini in Tola) of the two heroines. *Fuga statica*, static escape: this oxymoron alludes to the entire discourse of the film, to the way in which this *anti-road movie* represents Lenni and Stella's last shot to escape after their shocking killing, as it is grounded on the notion of paradox. Is the road genre a way to gain enlightenment? Was Jack Kerouac internally debating over the same issues as Dante did when he began working on his own road trip work? With due differences, perhaps they shared a common desperation. Perhaps they did

stick, and a last-minute, smiley-faced gesture for which critics, if this were a Hollywood picture, would blame test-screening audiences. Ah, who are we kidding? This *is* a Hollywood picture." <http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/screenreviews/benzina.htm>.

gain knowledge of the world. What matters is that travel, a trip, in literature as in cinema, almost predictably points at those deeply or mildly disaffected characters engaged in life renewal. The voyage Lenni, Stella (and Giovanna's body) take is for all intents and purposes a runaway. Initially misled by cinematic competence, only with some delay do we realize that, even though *Benzina's* characters' real crime is, as in the American film, a claim to "subjectivity" (Dargis 89) since characters "become outlaws the moment they seize control of their bodies" (Dargis 87), Lenni and Stella don't really "move." In the ring that limits Rome and connects the city to the *Autostrada del Sole*, the two women (with the dead body of Giovanna in the trunk) drive in circles, toward nowhere, and finally return to their gas station.

Indeed, the space of American road movies does not exist in this film, an anti-road movie instead. Its atmosphere is as claustrophobic as in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, a movie whose visual influence is the most apparent and recurring one in Stambrini's cinematography and use of the camera. Characters do not *move* at all. In an atmosphere dictated by significant haze, Lenni and Stella's footsteps are heavy and resounding: these two girls appear crashed by the external gaze of a society that produces language, mass-media, and norms. And they are haunted. Finally, *Benzina's* scenes bring to mind Ed Ruscha's celebrated series of *Gas Standard Stations* paintings and his *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* book.¹⁴

Ruscha painted this series and published the book of photographs in the early 1960s. This is a further expansion of his critique of the capitalist world that gas, cars, and roads signify. In Ruscha's domain of visual representation, namely painting, those oversized lines of the bright lights of Hollywood turn into flame while his carefully designed diagonal compositions celebrate roadside architecture and signs. At some point, Ruscha claimed he wanted to be a director. His wish, though not that uncommon in Los Angelinos, makes a statement, nevertheless, about the ever-present allure a painter often feels for the composition of a film frame, something always so close to that of painting, but dilated in its kinetic possibilities, capable of even more than a single painting. Cinematography in *Benzina*, set in a gas station as it is, more or less unconsciously draws much of its visual strength from Ruscha's source of inspiration and reference for films.¹⁵ By bringing into the production of the visual the essence of the lit-

¹⁴ Kerry Brougher notes, "The stations measure the road, giving it a sense of scale without actually depicting the space. *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* is a landscape—a 1,400-mile landscape" (163).

¹⁵ See Brougher's article for this topic.

erary—Stancanelli's novel, and the pictorial, Ed Ruscha's "deadpan serial display of filling stations" (Brougher 163), the film incorporates theorizations on visual culture partly derived from American Pop Art in its photography, while revisiting the American women's road movie genre as exemplified in the past fifteen years.¹⁶ (Fig. 2)

Figure 2: Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* (1963).

Courtesy of Hood Museum, Dartmouth College.

Director of photography, Fabio Cianchetti (who also directed the photography for Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* and *Besieged*)¹⁷ utilizes hues of red and turquoise in his compositions that evoke also chromatically Ruscha's gas stations. (The initial scene in the bar is rather telling of his techniques). From depicting gas stations, Ruscha moves on to constructing actual books with the photos of his gas stations. Ruscha defines a narrative in his visual, and then moves on to writing phrases in his paintings. Investigating the power of the word *within* or, better, *superimposed* onto the image, Ruscha establishes a set of reciprocal references/influences on the word-image relation and how topography influences the language.¹⁸ The

¹⁶ This genre sprang from Ruscha's generation, that of his great friend, actor Dennis Hopper director of 1966 *Easy Rider* which, in turn, owes much to Jack Kerouac's 1957 *On the Road*.

¹⁷ *Besieged* is drawn from James Lasdun's short story "The Siege," a romantic tale of obsession of a wealthy man for a young and secretive political refugee. Like the one in *Benzina*, this represents yet another story of marginalized corporeality and societal siege.

¹⁸ In the novel they are going to Greece, where they had spent their previous summer vacation.

citation of objects related to consumerism is not limited to placing untransformed items of capitalism within works of art, or making art of them. On the contrary, Ruscha defines the squalor of capitalist society by showing the displacement of such objects. Unlike Jean Baudrillard's thoughts on signs as stated in his *On America*, for Ruscha, the signs advertising gas stations are historically contextualized and directly referred to capitalist consumerism, to the displaced, the homeless, and the vagabonds lying on the sides of American highways. Signs are neither self-generating nor self-referential, and Ruscha's words attest to their contextualization. The thrusting diagonals and vanishing horizons that are visually apparent in Stambrini's film are already present in the setting of *Benzina* the novel as a geometric irresolvable rendition of Italian familism: the intricate relations between a mother, her daughter and the daughter's lover rule over other visual elements in the film.

In hybridizing the genres to which the film indeed pertains, namely the road movie and the lesbian thriller, Stambrini constructs diagonal forms of discourse with the figurative representations of lesbianism and mother-daughter relation composing the thematic matter of the novel, a crooked world where things don't stay where they should. In *Benzina* all things are crooked: the moon, the stars, and the sky, as Lenni points out to Stella at the end of their static journey. When Stella gives Lenni a snorkeling mask for their vacation in Tunisia¹⁹ Lenni looks at the stars. Through the distorted lens of the mask, Lenni uncovers that, aside from the stars, also the moon is not what she thought, "è tutta storta la luna" ("the moon is all crooked;" *Benzina* 151) as is the sky, "tutto storto anche il cielo" ("the sky is also all crooked;" *Benzina* 151). When Lenni and Stella wear the snorkeling mask while waiting to die, the entire system in which they have been living reveals to be crooked. In a different way, those diagonal lines constructing the frames of *Benzina*, reveal how crooked the world is for Lenni and Stella once they go out of, or try to leave, the gas station on the GRA, the *Grande Raccordo Anulare* (the Roman beltway). The gas station is not incidentally placed at the boundaries of the Eternal City, approximately where one could imagine the shantytowns described by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Long roads that design diagonal lines evoke at once different trajectories. They suggest trajectories of freedom as indicated/made believe by twentieth-century road movies and capitalist tools such as cinema and gas

¹⁹ Stella and Lenni only seem to retrieve into patriarchy when Uncle Ottavio compares Lenni's mother's hair to "petrolio" for its blackness (119). As Giovanna's previous life was deeply dictated by patriarchy, it is only fitting that her hair should be compared to petrol by her brother.

stations, from whose gas supply the entire Western civilization and our ability to fuel our journeys of pleasure or evasion depends (at least until the discovery and implementation of new energy). By default, they also put forward the impending power of capitalism as a bedrock of norms against which artists—and their “transgressive” characters—do resist to express their individual aims and beliefs, their conceptualization of sexuality and their subjective corporeal.²⁰

... BUT ROME IS NOT HOLLYWOOD

In *Benzina*, Californian or Texan gas stations as the ones depicted by Ruscha, placed at the sides of highways, are replaced by a Roman suburban squalid gas station. Californian highways give in to the *Raccordo Anulare*. Just as with his *Gas Stations* Ruscha traces the road from California to Texas making the pictorial space an only apparently dynamic one, devoid of a true, realistic landscape of any sort—Lenni and Stella’s diagonal lines converge into a perfectly clogged and suffocating circular one, the Roman beltway. It *looks* like a turnpike, but is not. Just like the lines on Stella’s hands look like turnpikes with no exit, “[a]utostrade senza uscita” (*Benzina* 65), in this beltway there is no exit for the girls. Using a Lynch title, this indeed is a *lost highway*. While Lenni and Stella drive in search of a getaway, the *Raccordo Anulare* takes on its full meaning: it’s a deadly ring that holds and controls the trajectories of individuals, forcing the characters to go back to the gas station, the space where they thought they had found refuge, the gas station that symbolized their heaven/haven and has now been violated.

We have here an anti-road movie that vividly depicts the societal suffocating space regulated by a heap of obscure violence and anger Lenni and Stella simply don’t want to be part of and they are powerless at modifying. As a consequence, that the two will never reach their place of destination is not merely a small “deviation from clichés” as Chambers claims forcing the meaning of the film to mental and cultural patterns that are foreign (or merely too accustomed to Hollywood and/or indie productions). Stella and Lenni *can’t* get very far out of the gate on their road trip for reasons that visually wed a personal impotence with a more public and social one. In the film, their “non-trip” further corroborates the sense of closure

²⁰ Sambuco believes that the gas station offers “a different dimension of the sense of the community, as its boundaries are not really exclusive of the outer world [...] it offers interaction with its customers” (133).

expressed in the novel. Far from denoting a sense of movement, the “road” and the semantic field connected with it merely point to stagnation and isolation²¹ for the two girls. Reversed in meaning, the road movie as a genre derived more in general from travel literature illustrates the lack of freedom that Lenni and Stella endure in spite of their claimed space, the gas station and the road from and to it. Indeed, as Ruscha’s paintings with long diagonals produce the visual effect of a static escape from consumerism in their absence of landscapes that can in some way depict California or Texas, also Stambrini’s sequences depict the gas station like a theatrical stage. No landscape around the station, the lines do not mark any point of departure from where they are. All lines seem to converge on it, as in the Twentieth Century Fox image depicting a place true only in our imagination.

Space is there for the two girls provided that they don’t transgress and trespass the limits of the station. Once they do so, they are damned. In the novel, the gas station indeed is likened to an island, “un’isola felice dove dimenticare le preoccupazioni” (*Benzina* 58; “a happy island where to forget worries”) in which “il marciapiede doveva segnare il confine tra il bar e la loro vita quotidiana” (*Benzina* 58; “the sidewalk was supposed to mark the threshold between the bar and their daily life”). *Doveva* means it was supposed to, but in actuality it did not. The gas station can hardly signify a place where Lenni and Stella can be themselves, as it stands to indicate only more deceptive space. My reading sees the gas station as a physical tin cage in which two subjects are confined and live—quite literally—at the borders and limits of society. Deconstructing the significance of a gas station into the emblem of confinement for the “transgressive” couple brings Stambrini’s work closer to the process of reversing the meaning of an object in Pop Art. The transformation into an icon of an everyday object of American consumerism estranges its own sense, makes it foreign to its own use. As the love story of Lenni and Stella is not considered a “normal” love story, their space is per force bound to “non-spaces:” the station as their island/oasis, the car as their vehicle which takes them back to the gas station, with Lenni’s mother corpse in the trunk. Love is not permitted, is “interrupted.” Dynamicity is forbidden to Lenni and Stella. The very oasis they created in this *terra franca* will be their curse.

²¹ This choice is criticized by Antonello Schioppa as they represent linguistic solutions that hold no efficacy and are not really personal, derived—but not reinterpreted—from Lynch, while Francioni and De Candido interpret such choice in a more positive manner.

AN EXPLOSIVE CONCLUSION

While the mother's death marks the beginning of *Benzina*, Lenni and Stella's death marks the end of it. The beltway is concluded as in the perfect ring of death that frames the story. The mother's death is functional to the development of the plot, while the two women's death is—according to Stancanelli—to be viewed as cathartic and liberating. The final death serves as an emotional cleansing. Both death scenes don't give in to easy empathy from spectators. The *Big Bang*, or the explosion in the final scene, once again mindful of Ruscha's stations, reminds us of other cinematic explosions. Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*' frames influence the construction of *Benzina*'s frames, Lynch's constant background of steel sheets or use of fire are mirrored in frames such as the one in which Stella lights the sole of her boot and in the one in which she is burning the clothes she and Lenni wore at the time of Giovanna's death.²² The characters' extreme close-ups suggest to spectators the materiality of each face, the line and shape of their features that are juxtaposed to the absurdity of the siege under which society places individuals. As absurd is the police siege that determines *Thelma and Louise*'s leap in the canyon.

In the novel, the gas station becomes an island surrounded by the dark sea of gasoline. The station is "la casa delle sirene" (*Benzina* 155; "the mermaids' house") in which "le due nuotatrici erano volate via, galleggiavano sopra le loro teste," (*Benzina* 155; "the two swimmers had flown away, suspended over the policemen's heads"). The film presents this image by way of the debris slowly raising to the sky, alluding to the souls' ascent to Heaven, a universal judgment of a different kind, with the camera vertically moving from the terrain space to a 'higher' one. Can we read it as homage to Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (via Lynch, of course) or should we read it in a different way?

At last, Lenni and Stella finally reach *the place*—Paradise. They arrive to a beach which, in their eyes, metaphorizes Heaven. "Io sto zitta e penso che tutta questa benzina sparsa diventa sabbia e al posto delle pompe sdraiate in terra ci sono le dune, come a Skiathos" (*Benzina* 148; "I stay quiet and think that all this shed gasoline becomes sand and instead of the pumps on the floor there are dunes, as in Skiathos"). "Quassù"—Up

²² Please, see my article "Proposte per una poetica 'liquida' dell'ideologia e dell'estetica contemporanee: Tiziano Scarpa e la parola 'altrui' della letteratura" for a more detailed discussion of Bauman's notion of liquid life and construction of identity in contemporary society.

here—is now their space where they find themselves along with Lenni's mother who will wait until the girls' death to finally ascend, while the "laggiù" life (the "down there") is left in the hands of the policemen, metonym for the official power, who are frightened by the girls' laughter from *quassù*. Finally,

[L]a rincorsa è finita, e non ci sono più denti per azzannarsi né tempi per crescere e invecchiare, e ora le possiamo ridere tutte le storie, e lasciarle dondolare una dietro l'altra, piano piano, fino a quando non toccano terra. (*Benzina* 156).

(The chase is over, and there are no more teeth to tear each other to pieces or time to grow up and age. Now we can laugh of all stories, and let them swing one behind the other, slowly, until they touch the ground)

That of Stancanelli's characters is a world *renversé*, where the sea rises above ground. All materiality loses solidity at the end of Stambrini's film. Birth to a perfect world is possible for Lenni, Stella, and Giovanna, but it can happen only once they all give up their roles on earth, which is the substance of which society made them. They have turned "liquid" (in the sense Zygmunt Bauman gives to this meaning) the space that confined them unless they would conform. The final explosion, though problematic, in the authorial intentions gives re-birth to the three women as society has never managed to let them be.²⁴

Where can Stambrini lead her spectators after all this hybridization, after all these references to Hollywood, Ruscha, Lynch, *Thelma and Louise*? Stambrini shapes her authorial take on Italian society's restrictive views in an aesthetic visual text that denies in all its subtexts, photo, montage, acting and casting, the terms by which we usually refer to, a road movie. For those who deviate from heteronormativity, Italian road movies do not lead to any space where existence can be possible for them, not even an isolated one such as a gas station. As a corollary to this, gasoline remains an object on which capitalistic wealth and conformistic norms are built. Paradoxically, no freedom is gained; no fuel is leading the girls to freedom. What "is marginal is located as a site of danger and vulnerability" (Grosz,

²⁴"This is what the psychotic aura attests to when a feeling of catastrophe about the end of the world [...] is associate with an overwhelming feeling of imminent redemption of every possibility or, in other words, the alarming oscillation between a proliferating complexity of sense and total vacuity, a hopeless dereliction of existential chaosmosis" (Guattari and Bains 81).

Volatile Bodies 195). Fluids surge and move (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 204) but one is left to wonder, “Che cosa diventa una storia dopo un’esplosione?” (*Benzina* 153; “What does a story become after an explosion?”). The film deals with space, with bodies that are volatile, with bodily fluids that connect women to other women in a bordered, restricted society in which same-sex love can be practiced only when confined. The death of a character, a fictional death that is, can never be perceived as a tool for freedom. Unless attempts are made at critiquing such society, lesbian love—and kinship for that matter—can not actually *go* anywhere but toward death, in a gigantic and purifying pyre, reminiscent of the sari rituals by which Hindu wives burn alive to escape the shame of widowhood. Once women are burnt, society is once again purified as the energy produced by the fire serves to cleanse emotions for the living humans. But, in fact, the women’s situation remains virtually intact. Utopia (or dystopia, for that matter) does not transform society effectively. It’s a non-place where solutions remain relegated to the space—however interesting and aesthetically appealing—of a film or a novel.

The legacy of the dead, what they, when dying, leave to the living, is a heroic and noteworthy one. The two *Benzinas* demonstrate the basic insufficiency of all notions on which the cult of the dead is built in dealing with the representation of women’s subjectivity and their position within society. Corollary of this is the fact that existence, whether in this world or in that represented by the term “Paradise” and “Hell” in patriarchal discourse, seems to be an extinct notion, just as much as the way to venture up ‘there.’ In this voyage to another world neither mentors nor saints do appear for the girls’ benefit. The universe described by Stancanelli and Stambrini “[n]on esistono madri generose, né figlie devote” (“neither generous mothers nor devout daughters do exist;” 114) justifies the final scene, entirely occupied by the explosion of the gas station, for from the production of energy produced by gas burning will also derive the energy to renew the world as they have known it. It is a vertical and dynamic explosion which seems to undermine Baudrillard’s notion of *implosion* as he took it from McLuhan. Are we really sure, in fact, that, as Baudrillard writes, “[...] death, as a fatal or symbolic event, must be erased. Death must be included only as virtual reality, as an option or changeable setting in the living being’s operating system?” (11).

To conclude, gasoline is a fluid that does not conform. Furthermore, in addition to its deregulating, liquid, *essence*—the French word for it—, it is extremely dangerous, for it also *burns* objects it saturates as it does with the space—where gasoline lies in the wake of a future explosion. Gasoline

is a propelling liquid which ignites, however, the possibility to escape. In road movies, we give gasoline the role of the enabler: characters are shot while endlessly filling the tanks of their cars, pick up trucks, and motorcycles fleeing reality thanks to gasoline. Perhaps we should give credit to what Stambrini thinks about the cathartic power of the final explosion: a visual element, that is, that triggers a liberating effect for her characters. Or perhaps, just the opposite, we are left to think that the space for this kind of couple is confined, unless they conform.

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