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# Women Crossing Borders. Elena Ferrante's *Smarginature* Across Media

Laura Sarnelli

“Una storia comincia quando una dietro l'altra le nostre frontiere cedono.”  
 (“A story begins when, one after another, our borders collapse.”)<sup>1</sup>

## *Ferrante Fever: The Transnational Turn*

The shadowy silhouette of a woman wearing a grey coat and a cloche hat crosses busy streets in blurry movements. Her face is obscured, while a female voice-over pronounces “words that emerge to form vaguely defined images” as the streets are re-elaborated through a visual effect that makes them resemble drawn sketches (Dursi 2017). The woman is the “mysterious” Italian writer Elena Ferrante, as imagined by filmmaker Giacomo Dursi in his documentary *Ferrante Fever*. The location is New York City, the epicenter of Ferrante’s worldwide success outside the geographical borders of Italy.

These clips introduce the subject of the present article. My aim is to offer new insights into Elena Ferrante’s poetics and her aesthetic re-appropriations. Specifically, I will focus in these pages on “women who cross borders.” Women in the literature of Elena Ferrante trespass boundaries on multiple levels. On an extra-textual level, the writer herself transgresses thresholds of national belonging between her alleged hometown of Naples and the English-speaking world where her work has been highly praised. National border crossing is also evident in the implication that the writer herself has lived outside of Italy, as *Ferrante Fever* has shown. The fragmentary narration of this unusual documentary intimately conveys a troubled sense of place, which reflects from the very beginning the porous edges of transnational belongings. Not by chance, overlapping scenes of Manhattan skylines and montages of the city of Naples, interspersed with discussions by journalists, scholars, directors, and authors based in both the United States and Italy, point to the fact that “Ferrante Fever” as a global cultural phenomenon had to originate in independent bookstores in New York City before journeying back to Italy to assess the writer’s popularity.<sup>2</sup> The relevance of the documentary lies in highlighting the

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<sup>1</sup> Ferrante (2016, 316 [2016, 326]).

<sup>2</sup> This transnational paradigm surprisingly evokes the earlier one of Elvira Notari (1875-1946), the first Italian woman director who produced an extensive filmography in the context of Neapolitan silent cinema. Notari also founded a production and distribution company, Dora Film, which had a subsidiary office in New York City. Successfully exported to America and exhibited in New York, Notari’s films shot in the 1920s provided an “imaginary return voyage for Italian immigrant audiences” (Bruno 5). The intertextual and transcultural relations between the cities of Naples and New York in her documentary-style films show this uncanny resonance in Dursi’s documentary. Rather than shedding light on the writer’s identity, *Ferrante Fever* investigates the reasons behind Ferrante’s international success through interviews with authoritative personalities of both the North American and Italian culture industries. The voices from New York include: Michael Reynolds, editor of Europa Editions, which publishes Ferrante’s books in English; Lisa Lucas, executive director of the National Book Foundation; Sarah McNally, the co-owner of the McNally Jackson bookstore, which hosted the “Ferrante Night Fever” event on

importance of a process of cultural translation whose literary object – the four-volume series of *L'amica geniale*, or the Neapolitan Novels – has taken up the gauntlet of the “transnational turn.”<sup>3</sup>

Naples plays a crucial role in the success of the books, whose narrated events would be unthinkable without the “imprint” of Neapolitan-ness. Yet, the author has been able to translate peculiarly “locally grounded narratives” into an example of global literature (Segnini 2017, 100-118). The controversial words “global,” “glocal” (the global circulation of local cultures) and “transnational” bring to the fore the question of translation, meant both as a transfer of meaning from one language and culture to another, as well as intersemiotic translation, that is, trans-codification into a different medium. Significantly, the woman now believed to be hidden behind the name of Elena Ferrante was first a translator and translation was in fact her starting point. Her perception of being Italian is indeed predicated upon her view of linguistic nationality “in quanto punto di partenza per dialogare, in quanto sforzo di passare il limite, guardare oltre confine, oltre tutti i confini, innanzitutto quelli di genere” (IO, 20; “as a point of departure for dialogue, an effort to cross over the limit, to look beyond the border – beyond all borders, especially those of gender” [II, 24]).<sup>4</sup> Ferrante herself discusses the importance of the art of translation as a form of border crossing. Translators are her “only heroes,” people who are capable of dissolving boundaries (II, 24); thanks to them, the circulation of her literary texts beyond their national linguistic confines is made possible, and in this process:

l'italianità va per il mondo arricchendolo, e il mondo con le sue tante lingue attraversa l'italianità, la modifica. Coloro che traducono trasportano nazioni entro altre nazioni, sono i primi a fare i conti con modi di sentire distanti. [...] È la traduzione la nostra salvezza, ci tira fuori dal pozzo dentro cui del tutto casualmente si è finiti per nascita. (IO, 20)

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November 1, 2015; Anne Goldstein, Ferrante’s revered translator; and the novelists Elizabeth Strout and Jonathan Franzen. The Italian interviewees include, among others, acclaimed author Roberto Saviano, best known for his book on the Neapolitan Mafia *Gomorra*, writers Francesca Marciano and Nicola Lagioia, and filmmakers Mario Martone and Roberto Faenza.

<sup>3</sup> On the popularity of Elena Ferrante’s translated fiction in the United States, see Milkova (2016a, 166-173). For an overview of the reception of the Neapolitan Novels in Italy, see Schwartz (2020, 1-21).

<sup>4</sup> All citations from the Italian editions of Elena Ferrante’s works are provided with their English translations, which are given in brackets following the quote. Elena Ferrante’s four-volume series *L'amica geniale* is known in English as the Neapolitan Novels. It was translated by Ann Goldstein and published by Europa Editions (New York). The quartet includes: *L'amica geniale* (2011), henceforth referred to as AG (*My Brilliant Friend* [2012], henceforth referred to as BF); *Storia del nuovo cognome* (2012), henceforth referred to as SNC (*The Story of a New Name* [2013], henceforth referred to as SNN); *Storia di chi resta e di chi fugge* (2013), henceforth referred to as SRF (*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* [2014], henceforth referred to as TLS); and *Storia della bambina perduta* (2014), henceforth referred to as SBP (*The Story of the Lost Child* [2015], henceforth referred to as SLC). Ferrante is also the author of *I giorni dell'abbandono* (2002), henceforth referred to as GA (*The Days of Abandonment* [2005], henceforth referred to as DA), which was made into a film directed by Roberto Faenza; *L'amore molesto* (1992; *Troubling Love* [2006]), adapted for film by Mario Martone; and *La figlia oscura* (2006; *The Lost Daughter* [2008]). She has also written *La frantumaglia* (2016), henceforth referred to as LF (*Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey* [2016], henceforth referred to as F), in which she recounts her experience as a novelist; and a children’s picture book illustrated by Mara Cerri, *La spiaggia di notte* (2007; *The Beach at Night* [2016]). The first two seasons of the Rai/HBO series *My Brilliant Friend*, directed by Saverio Costanzo, premiered in 2018 and 2020. Her latest books include a collection of essays *L'invenzione occasionale* (2019), henceforth referred to as IO (*Incidental Inventions* [2019], henceforth referred to as II); and the novel *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (2019; *The Lying Life of Adults* [2019]).

(Italianness travels through the world, enriching it, and the world, with its many languages, passes through Italianness and modifies it. Translators transport nations into other nations; they are the first to reckon with distant modes of feeling [...] Translation is our salvation: it draws us out of the well in which, entirely by chance, we are born. [II, 24])

As has been pointed out, the Neapolitan Novels are, first and foremost, a real transnational phenomenon in terms of editorial mediation and production (Sullam 2015). In fact, the conjoined enterprise of Italian and North American publishing houses E/O and Europa Editions managed by Sandro Ferri and Sandra Ozzola Ferri marks from the onset the editorial project of Ferrante's work as transnational. This is also reflected in the book covers of the American and Italian editions, which mostly retain the same images. The covers – highly criticized for their vulgar and kitschy quality – display several characters, mostly female, as they are portrayed from behind against the backdrop of a visibly Neapolitan setting in the most important moments of their lives (marriage, adulthood, maternity, and childhood, respectively). Graphic designer Emanuele Ragnisco explains that what gets lost on the audience is that all the characters look at the sea, contemplating the horizon beyond the Gulf of Naples. “The sea is an infinite narrative space” that essentially opens up the possibility for border crossings (Grimaldi 2018). Indeed, Ferrante's books are all about women attempting to cross lines, both physical and mental.

Whereas the editorial projects of Ferrante's novels have been discussed extensively by both the editors and the graphic designer, little attention has been paid to the cover of the latest edition of Ferrante's non-fiction book *La frantumaglia* (2016), which displays a photograph by American artist Francesca Woodman (fig. 1). Only a few critics have noticed the highly appropriate choice of this image as a perfect threshold into the author's book (Pigliaru 2016; Frank 2016), while the graphic designer Ragnisco does not provide any motivation in crafting this specific cover. He simply declares that “a good cover must put the text of the book at the center of the design project and be based on a close collaboration between the author, the publisher, and the designer” (Mansfield 2020). It would be interesting to know to what extent Ferrante herself has contributed to this process of artistic production, and how much of her creative vision is behind this cover. In this respect, transnational borders between North America and Italy are crossed in an “uncanny” process of trans-codification, as Francesca Woodman's photography significantly “translates” the poetics Ferrante discusses at length in her autobiographical collection of writings *La frantumaglia*.

### **From Francesca Woodman to Elena Ferrante: A Fragmented Visual Poetics**

Francesca Woodman, a talented American artist born in 1958, took her own life by jumping out a window when she was only twenty-two years old. Woodman considered Italy her second home, as the years she spent in Florence, Rome and Antella on her educational path proved to be pivotal for her artistic development. From 1972 to 1981, Woodman produced a significant body of photographs taken between the U.S. and Italy, mainly black and white nude portraits of herself and other female models, which have received international critical acclaim for their remarkably surreal and haunting quality. Her precocious work often reveals a naked woman dissolving into abandoned spaces or on the verge of disappearing or dying. Indeed, her most frequently utilized

technique was time exposure, which had the effect of blurring and diffusing her figures, thus making them appear as evanescent and ethereal.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 1. *La frantumaglia* (e/o)

The cover art design of *La frantumaglia* is based on the photograph titled *House #3*, where Woodman portrays herself curled under a window frame, fading in blurry movements in the decrepit interior of an abandoned house. The contours of her body dissolve against the backdrop of shards of torn wallpaper, pieces of debris and fragments scattered on old floorboards. As the margins between body and space become blurred and fragmented, Woodman's ghostly figure seems to disappear into the wall. Yet, her clearly visible gaze actively directed at the viewer makes the photographed woman resist both the passivity of simply being engulfed by her surroundings and the possibility of becoming a mere object to be looked at, thus affirming both her unsettling presence and her right to disappear. As has been argued, Francesca Woodman's imagery creates an ambivalent ludic/demonic space that questions old myths of femininity by presenting the women depicted in her photographs as figures of "irruptive difference" rather than "inevitable victim[s]" (Byron-Wilson 2011, 191).

At first glance, this image could suggest Ferrante's insistence on keeping her identity concealed from the public. In the documentary *Ferrante Fever*, a voice-over simulating Ferrante's (performed by actress Anna Bonaiuto) affirms the writer's right for her books to speak for themselves, independent of the author's tangible presence: "non è la mia assenza a generare interesse per i miei libri ma è l'interesse per i miei libri a generare attenzione mediatica nei confronti della mia assenza" ("it is not my absence that generates interest in my books, but the interest in my books that generates media interest in my absence"). However, both the cover picture and the photographer Francesca Woodman are more than an immediate reference to the writer Elena Ferrante, who firmly claims her "desire for intangibility," "her right to disappear," in other words, her will to hide her identity behind her books at all costs (Frank 2016). By laying

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<sup>5</sup> I have analyzed Francesca Woodman's work in my book (Sarnelli 2013, 9-14), and in Sarnelli (2015).

bare the ambivalent relationship between absence and presence, “death drive” and “pleasure principle,” loss/disappearance and compulsion to survive/to recover the trace, Woodman’s photograph is indeed a brilliant work of feminine intersemiotic translation as it powerfully – even though unwittingly – foreshadows Ferrante’s poetics of *frantumaglia* and *smarginatura*.

Structured as a fragmented assemblage of Elena Ferrante’s authorial identity, the non-fiction book *La frantumaglia* is written in a language that is as friable as the image of the author that it tries to expose, as it constantly lingers on the edge of a vortex that blurs any easy distinction between fiction and reality, dream and matter.<sup>6</sup> The book maps “the writer’s journey” that, far from following a linear autobiographical path, delves into the twists and turns of Ferrante’s thoughts and memories. Indeed, the very etymology of *frantumaglia* resurfaces from a painful childhood memory: a combination of the term *frantumi* (fragments or shards) and the pejorative suffix *-aglia*, the word comes from the Neapolitan dialect of her mother to describe her contradictory feeling of a disjointed self, a disquieting “jumble of fragments” that tore her apart. *Frantumaglia* connotes the perception of an emotional whirlpool that makes the ego falter and lean out over the dark depths of its psychic life, where it risks shattering and getting lost:

Mia madre mi ha lasciato un vocabolo del suo dialetto che usava per dire come si sentiva quando era tirata di qua e di là da impressioni contraddittorie che la laceravano. Diceva che aveva dentro una frantumaglia. La frantumaglia (lei pronunciava *frantummàglia*) la deprimeva [...] La frantumaglia è un paesaggio instabile, una massa aerea o acquatica di rottami all’infinito che si mostra all’io, brutalmente, come la sua vera e unica interiorità. La frantumaglia è il deposito del tempo senza l’ordine di una storia, di un racconto. La frantumaglia è l’effetto del senso di perdita, quando si ha la certezza che tutto ciò che ci sembra stabile, duraturo, un ancoraggio per la nostra vita, andrà a unirsi presto a quel paesaggio di detriti che ci pare di vedere. (LF, 94-95)

(My mother left me a word in her dialect that she used to describe how she felt when she was racked by contradictory sensations that were tearing her apart. She said that inside her she had a *frantumaglia*, a jumble of fragments. The *frantumaglia* (she pronounced it *frantummàglia*) depressed her [...] The *frantumaglia* is an unstable landscape, an infinite aerial or aquatic mass of debris that appears to the I, brutally, as its true and unique inner self. The *frantumaglia* is the storehouse of time without the orderliness of a history, a story. The *frantumaglia* is an effect of the sense of loss, when we’re sure that everything that seems to us stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of debris that we seem to see. [F, 99-100])

The documentary *Ferrante Fever* provides a visual representation of this concept with sketchy and watercolor-like animated sequences showing a blurry female figure who walks away from the camera down crowded busy streets: “La frantumaglia è percepire con dolorosissima angoscia da quale folla di eterogenei leviamo, vivendo, la nostra voce e in quale folla di eterogenei essa è destinata a perdersi” (LF, 95; “*Frantumaglia* is to perceive with excruciating

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<sup>6</sup> *La frantumaglia* in its latest revised edition (2016) is a collection of reflections, letters, essays and interviews with editors, journalists and movie directors assembled over the course of twenty years. Interestingly, the cover of the first two editions (2003, 2007) displays not Woodman’s photograph but a portrait of a headless woman.

anguish the heterogeneous crowd from which we, living, raise our voice, and the heterogeneous crowd into which it is fated to vanish” [F, 100]). Past and present converge in this word as it conveys contradictory feelings: on the one hand, it connotes an acoustic-visual sensation connected to the writer’s childhood memory as “un’esplosione coloratissima di suoni, migliaia e migliaia di farfalle con ali sonore” (LF, 95; “a bright-colored explosion of sounds, thousands and thousands of butterflies with sonorous wings” [F, 100]); on the other, the word refers to a more mature fear of fading or losing the use of language, “the anguish of death,” the sorrowful feeling of a body evaporating, “leaking air and liquids” (ibid). As one of the main words in Ferrante’s “family lexicon,” *frantumaglia* is interestingly gender-inflected as a peculiarly feminine psychic fragmentation:

So cosa significa frantumarsi. L’ho osservato in mia madre, in me, in molte donne [...] Per me significa raccontare, oggi, un io femminile che all’improvviso si percepisce in destrutturazione, smarrisce il tempo, non si sente più in ordine, si avverte come un vortice di detriti, un turbinio di pensieri-parole. (LF, 215)

(I know what it means to break apart. I observed it in my mother, in myself, in many women [...] It means telling the story of a present-day female “I” that loses the sense of time, it’s no longer in order, it feels like a vortex of debris, a whirlwind of thoughts-words. [F, 223])

On the other hand, Ferrante re-elaborates this concept into a more constructive metaphor that foregrounds her poetics. Experiencing the feeling of *frantumaglia* – described also as an unrepresentable magma – is exactly what allows the creative act of writing through which she can recompose her sense of self: “Ogni interiorità, al fondo, è un magma che urta contro l’autocontrollo, ed è quel magma che bisogna provare a raccontare, se vogliamo che la pagina abbia energia” (LF, 302; “Every interior state is, ultimately, a magma that clashes with self-control, and it’s that magma we have to try to describe, if we want the page to have energy” [F, 313]).

Ferrante introduces the word *frantumaglia* when she is spurred by some interviewers to reflect on the suffering of her female protagonists as they seem to come from myths and models of Mediterranean femininity, from which they have extricated themselves only in part. As she has argued, the source of their suffering is not the conflict between the failure to conform to female traditional roles and their desire to become emancipated “women of today.” It is rather an “achrony” in which they are caught as in a “dizzy spell” – “in una sorta di acronia si affolla il passato delle loro antenate e il futuro di ciò che cercano di essere, ombre, fantasmi” (LF, 103; “the past of their ancestors and the future of what they seek to be, the shades, the ghosts” [F, 108-109]) – that which breaks them apart, to the point that Delia and Olga, for instance, can see in the mirror the counter-reflected image of their mothers.

Ferrante’s fictional women visualize the feeling of *frantumaglia* through a sensory perception called *smarginatura*. If *frantumaglia* signifies the “process and result of shattering” (as translator Ann Goldstein argues in the documentary), *smarginatura* is a semantic neologism that indicates the feeling of “dissolving margins” (or “dissolving boundaries”) felt within the subject or in the outside world. More specifically, while *frantumaglia* is a mental condition, a psychic-physical malaise in which past and present overlap, *smarginatura* is its materialization, a bodily experience described as a synesthetic perception that encompasses the surrounding world

and the female body in the totality of its senses. This is how Lenù, the narrating voice in *L'amica geniale*, describes Lila's dissolving margins:<sup>7</sup>

Usò proprio smarginare. [...] Disse che i contorni di cose e persone erano delicati, che si spezzavano come il filo del cotone. Mormorò che per lei era così da sempre, una cosa si smarginava e pioveva su un'altra, era tutto uno sciogliersi di materie eterogenee, un confondersi e rimescolarsi. [...] Un'emozione tattile si scioglieva in visiva, una visiva si scioglieva in olfattiva. (SBP, 161-162)

(She used that term: *dissolving boundaries* [...] she said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing. [...] A tactile emotion would melt into a visual one, a visual one would melt into an olfactory one. [SLC, 175])

Lila experiences *smarginatura* when the binarisms of social and gender normativity become unbearable to her, when the sociocultural pressures exercised by the claustrophobic and misogynistic reality of the *rione* – her neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples – tries to break her apart (see Crispino and Vitale 2016, 30). Interestingly, *smarginatura* is described as a sudden rupture exposing a horrific dimension, “the unfiltered matrix behind phenomenal reality” (Ghezzi and Teardo 2019, 181), where bodies, objects, and words are stripped of any meaning. As Lenù writes: “le era accaduto per la prima volta di avvertire entità sconosciute che spezzavano il profilo del mondo e ne mostravano la natura spaventosa” (AG, 87; “She had perceived for the first time unknown entities that broke down the outlines of the world and demonstrated its terrifying nature” [BF, 89]). As has been pointed out, the concept of *smarginatura* conveys an “uncanny” *aura*, as it “implies boundaries bleeding into each other, the familiar morphing into the unfamiliar, the collapse of certainty and assurances that blur, undermine, and trouble simultaneously” (Bullaro and Love 2016, 5).

The vocabulary Ferrante uses – “fragmenting self” and “dissolving margins” – is highly visual and echoes Francesca Woodman's powerful images showing a break, a passage to a dreadful reality: “Sono attratta invece dalle immagini di crisi, dai sigilli che si spezzano, e forse le smarginature vengono da lì. Lo smarginarsi delle forme è un affacciarsi sul tremendo” (LF, 363; “I'm drawn to images of crisis, to seals that are broken, and perhaps the dissolving boundaries come from these. When shapes lose their contours, we see what most terrifies us” [F, 373]). On the cover of the latest Italian edition of *L'amica geniale*, two young actors (Elisa Del Genio and Ludovica Nasti) portraying Lenù and Lila from the homonymous TV series adaptation seem to pop up out of a photograph by Francesca Woodman, as they try to sneak out through the door of a dark and eerie interior of a house (fig. 2).

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<sup>7</sup> The plot of *L'amica geniale* quartet revolves around a life-long friendship between two women, Lila and Lenù, as they try to emancipate themselves from the social and gender confines of a post-war working-class Neapolitan neighborhood. The story covers the span of 60 years, from the 1950s to the present day.





Fig. 2. *L'amica geniale* (e/o)

As in Woodman's photography, the house in Ferrante's fiction is a significant *topos* charged with archaic cultural allusions: it is the *locus* of confinement, patriarchal violence and traditional roles for women as well as a place that hides specters and horrors. Metonymically, Naples represents this space in Ferrante's work. Dangerous and suffocating, repulsive and attractive like a "sirena perversa" (LF, 6; "perverse siren" [F, 66]), Naples is a powerful symbolic location that comes to signify a sort of Mediterranean matrix: "questa città non è un luogo qualsiasi, è un prolungamento del corpo, è una matrice della percezione, è il termine di paragone di ogni esperienza" (LF, 60; "[Naples] is not an ordinary place; it's an extension of the body, a matrix of perception, the term of comparison of every experience" [F, 65]). In the documentary *Ferrante Fever*, Italian author Roberto Saviano praises how Ferrante depicts the microcosm of Naples in a way that is faithful to its archetypes (family, women, violence, crime, back alleys) but never slips into cliché. As he argues, archetypes become cliché if they are observed from the same point of view, always told with the same repeated words. Ferrante, instead, overturns them. Throughout her family anthropology, she constantly questions whether "happiness is possible despite all the hell" (Dursi 2017). Positing Naples as the place from which one leaves yet also to which one eventually returns, Ferrante's women are constantly engaged in a struggle to cross borders.<sup>8</sup> They seem to address the question "Can you escape a destiny, when destiny is your own body?" (Dursi 2017). Actually, the body and the house – specifically, female bodies and Naples – prove to be not just a confinement but also a threshold, a break that disturbs the binarisms of belonging, gender and social normativity.

Ambivalent belongings represent a recurring theme in Ferrante's work, in terms of topography as well as feminine identities. All her novels are engaged in exploring what it means to be a woman when the woman herself is constantly inside and outside the neat confines of

<sup>8</sup> As Tiziana de Rogatis has argued: "La quadrilogia è la storia di due amiche che si alleano per 'passare il limite' (LF 316), per sconfinare dagli spazi reali e simbolici nei quali una millenaria subalternità femminile le ha rinchiuso" (de Rogatis 2018; "The quartet is the story of two friends who join forces to 'step beyond' borders [F 327], to break through the real and symbolic spaces of oppression to which they have been confined for ages" [de Rogatis 2019]).

prescribed gender roles and institutions. Delia (*L'amore molesto/Troubling Love*), Olga (*I giorni dell'abbandono/The Days of Abandonment*), Leda (*La figlia oscura/The Lost Daughter*), Lila and Lenù (*L'amica geniale/My Brilliant Friend*) are all caught in that liminal space of being ambivalently in and out the city, in and out the self, in and out of maternity, in and out of marriage. Belonging and identity boundaries are crossed as the female characters are constantly between, or on the edge of, different subject positions. They are simultaneously deeply rooted in and exiled from, respectively, southern cityscapes (Naples itself/migration to northern Italian cities), class categories (working class/middle class, low-brow/high-brow culture) and gender roles (mothers/anti-mothers, self-abnegating/adulterous wives, compliant/disobedient daughters).

In exploring the darkest recesses of a woman's experience, Ferrante stresses the importance of learning "the art of getting lost," that is, disappearing or keeping oneself apart from the pernicious operations of patriarchal plots in order to assert female agency: "occorre apprendere l'arte di perdersi nel penoso e nell'intricato, non c'è Arianna che non coltivi da qualche parte un amore molesto, l'immagine di una madre amatissima che tuttavia mette al mondo bambole suicide e minotari" (F, 143; "we have to learn the art of getting lost in the difficulties and impracticalities, there is no Ariadne who doesn't cultivate somewhere a troubling love, the image of a beloved mother who nevertheless gives birth to suicidal dolls and minotaur" [LF, 152]). The true sense of *smarginatura* proves to be the "art" of fragmenting, dissolving and crossing the borders of identity only to re-emerge in new feminine subjectivities that offer different ways of being in the world. *Smarginatura*, therefore, comes to signify a powerful metaphorical chronotope, specifically, a linguistic and visual configuration of time and space that questions a series of margins as they are trespassed in the process of undermining established discourses of womanhood and femininity.<sup>9</sup>

The intensely graphic language that characterizes Ferrante's textuality anticipates this border crossing. In this respect, Stiliana Milkova has discussed the dynamic visuality of Ferrante's poetics through the exploration of the use of "ekphrasis" as a dominant visual trope in her fiction that undermines from within the patriarchal paradigm of representation (Milkova 2016b, 159-182). Traditionally, *ekphrasis* – denoting, from classical rhetoric, the description of an artwork in literature – has cast men as the primary bearers of the gaze as well as of the voice. As Milkova contends, however, *ekphrasis* in Ferrante's texts "operates as a visual metaphor for the mechanisms of oppression, violence and objectification of women" (ibid., 160), while at the same time it "allows an exit out of patriarchy and posits woman as an autonomous artist figure who wields creative, constructive power" (ibid.), thus enabling her to elude the dominant order.

Depictions of paintings and photographs are recurrent in Ferrante's texts. One of the most powerful ekphrastic visualizations is represented by Lila's manipulation of her wedding photograph. Symbolically the picture of Lila as a married woman represents not only her loss of identity, erased by the adoption of her husband's last name ("Cerullo va in Carracci, vi precipita, ne è assorbita, vi si dissolve" [SNC, 124-25; "Cerullo goes Carracci, falls into it, is sucked up by it, is dissolved in it" (SNN, 123-24)]), but also her objectification and commodification within an abusive and corrupt masculine world represented by her family and the Solara brothers. Lila agrees to exhibit her enlarged photograph to advertise their shoe shop only after an active,

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<sup>9</sup> Following Mikhail Bakhtin's elaborations in literary theory, I refer to the metaphor of the "chronotope" as a formally constitutive configuration of time and space in literature, where "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 1981, 84).

playful intervention in which she creatively modifies her portrait into a work of art. Through a *décollage* of lines and colors, tapes and pins, black paper cutouts and strips of newspaper, Lila completes “la propria autodistruzione *in immagine*” (SNC, 122; “her own self-destruction *in an image*” [SNN, 123]), as the truncated body of the bride appears “crudelmente trinciato” (SNC, 119; “cruelly shredded” [SNN, 119]). She transforms the image of herself from an object to be fetishized into a powerful, sublime female figure that cannot be fully contemplated or grasped: “Lila non era più riconoscibile. Restava una forma seducente e tremenda, un’immagine di dea monocola che spingeva i suoi piedi ben calzati al centro della sala” (SNC, 126; “Lila was no longer recognizable. What remained was a seductive, tremendous form, the image of a one-eyed goddess who thrust her beautiful shod feet into the center of the room” [SNN, 127]).

This description of the photograph has been vividly portrayed in the Rai/HBO TV adaptation of *Storia del nuovo cognome* in the episode significantly titled “Scancellare” (“Erasure”), where Lila’s body appears mutilated and recomposed (fig. 3). In Lila’s aggressive collage, feminine self-refashioning takes shape through a process of self-erasure and self-fragmentation, that is, through a process of *smarginatura*. The photo, as “one of the Neapolitan Novels’ central visual metaphors of resistance against male focalization of the female body” (Wehling-Giorgi 2019, 76), seems to suggest that the only way a woman’s body can eschew the male objectifying gaze is to obscure itself beyond recognition. In this respect, Francesca Woodman is summoned once again, as Lila’s manipulated portrait is reminiscent of the American artist’s haunting pictures which function as photographic metatexts within Ferrante’s writing.



Fig. 3. Saverio Costanzo, *L'amica geniale: Storia del nuovo cognome*, 2020, Still.



Fig. 4. Francesca Woodman, *From Space<sup>2</sup>*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. Gelatin silver print. © 2020 Estate of Francesca Woodman / Charles Woodman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. This image is not covered by this article's CC BY-NC license.



Fig. 5. Francesca Woodman, *About Being My Model*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. Gelatin silver print. © 2020 Estate of Francesca Woodman / Charles Woodman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. This image is not covered by this article's CC BY-NC license.

In the picture *From Space*<sup>2</sup> (fig. 4), Woodman stands naked against a wall with crumbling paint and fragments on the floor; shreds of wallpaper wrap her chest and the lower part of her body, while her face is cut off by the frame. Rather than being swallowed up by the confining ramshackle house, the female body significantly standing between two windows seems to be emerging from the wall by actively manipulating the wallpaper, thus laying claim to a feminine space that sets her free.<sup>10</sup> As an act of resistance to past figurations of women in artworks (Conley 2009, 234-235), this self-portrait immediately recalls Lila's "cruelly shredded body" where "much of the head had disappeared" (SNN, 119). By manipulating her photo, Lila, like Woodman, transforms herself from passive model to active creator. In the photograph *About Being My Model* (fig. 5), three nude young women are portrayed with their faces obscured by headshots of Woodman; one of them is standing forward wearing a pair of white socks with black shoes, thus evoking, for us, Ferrante's description of Lila as a young goddess-like figure "who thrust her beautiful shod feet into the center of the room" (SNN, 127). Even when nakedness is explicit, Woodman's self-portraits hide the female body as much as they reveal it, leaving the viewer wondering if the artist is, in fact, present in the image. In the picture *Self-deceit #7* (fig. 6), the edges of Woodman's body disintegrate due to a combination of long exposure shots and movement, thus showing the elusive moment in which she becomes evanescent before disappearing.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 6. Francesca Woodman, *Self-deceit #7*, Rome, 1978. © 2020 Estate of Francesca Woodman / Charles Woodman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. This image is not covered by this article's CC BY-NC license.

<sup>10</sup> This picture recalls, by contrast, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), where the wallpaper becomes a prison-refuge for the confined female protagonist. Both Woodman and Ferrante may have been inspired by the short story.

<sup>11</sup> The image is from a series of photographs called *Self-deceit*, which Woodman took while studying in Rome. The photograph is not a self-portrait in the conventional sense, as it explores the possibilities of representation instead of revealing the artist's identity. In the photograph, she uses a mirror as a prop to deflect the intrusive gaze of the camera.

Similarly, in her fictional and non-fictional works, Elena Ferrante conceals and reveals, at the same time, both her imaginary and authorial identities. Her short essay “Questa sono io” (IO, 103-104; “This is me,” [II, 107-108]) becomes paradigmatic in this sense. Though she dislikes being photographed, the writer admits an act of “self-deceit” (II, 108) as she displays a picture of herself as a young woman that does not correspond to her idea of herself: “Lì ci sono io che manifesto il meglio di me, sfuggendo così al mio aspetto fisico consueto” (IO, 104; “It’s a ‘me’ showing off the best of myself, thus escaping my usual physical appearance” [II, 108]). Indeed, like her fictional characters, Elena Ferrante’s presence as a writer is predicated on her “dissolving margins, disappearing” (F, 276), as she offers “una permanente esposizione di frammenti miei” (IO, 110; “a permanent exposure of fragments of herself” [II, 114]). Hence, Ferrante’s narrative can be likened to an *ekphrasis* of Woodman’s enigmatic photographs that strikingly embody, in their turn, a visualization – a *mise en abyme* – of her poetics of *frantumaglia* and its manifestation as *smarginatura*. Accordingly, the Woodman-Ferrante comparison is foregrounded as that which allows for a new interpretation of *smarginatura*. It is precisely through the conjugation of Woodman’s and Ferrante’s women that *smarginatura* can be posited as a border crossing that produces something different, rather than a pure dissolving or loss of contours. Indeed, the loss itself is paradoxically refashioned as a gain.

### Transmedia *Smarginature*

The women who speak in Ferrante’s works are mostly absent, disappeared, dead or deadly, and they always do so from a dissolving margin, which nonetheless proves to be empowering: the writer herself, disturbing mothers and daughters, female doubles that split and overlap to become one again, like Lila and Lenù. Lila embodies a powerful phantasmatic female figure who speaks out loud even when she is not tangibly present. Indeed, it is from the void left by her ghostly disappearance that the narration originates. In the prologue of *L’amica geniale*, not only does Lila carry out her wish to disappear, she also succeeds in “cancellare le tracce” (“eliminating all the traces”) of her entire existence, even cutting her face out of family photographs: “Voleva non solo sparire lei, adesso, a sessantasei anni, ma anche cancellare tutta la vita che si era lasciata alle spalle” (AG, 19; “she wanted not only to disappear, now, at the age of sixty-six, but also to eliminate the entire life that she has left behind” [BF, 23]).

Yet, it is her voice and her image that reverberate through the written word of the other woman, Lenù, who, like “a hypnotic ghost-writer” (Ghezzi and Teardo 2019, 189), attempts to create “una forma che non si smargini,” (SBP, 444; “a form whose boundaries won’t dissolve” [SLC, 466]). And it is still Lila who takes center stage in the Rai/HBO television adaptation of the Neapolitan quartet, where Lenù, maybe not by chance, is almost always silent, dazed, catalectic, as if she were possessed by the spirit of the other woman, Lila: “Mi aveva ingannata, mi aveva trascinato dove voleva lei, fin dall’inizio della nostra amicizia. Per tutta la vita aveva raccontato una *sua* storia di riscatto, usando il *mio* corpo vivo e la *mia* esistenza” (SBP, 451; “she has deceived me, she has dragged me wherever she wanted, from the beginning of our friendship. All our lives she had told a story of redemption that was *hers*, using *my* living body and *my* existence” [SLC, 473, emphasis in original]).

*Smarginatura*, therefore, is also a process of doubling, of crossing the borders between self and other. Lila and Lenù, as has been pointed out, represent a literary variant of the double/*doppelgänger*, as they embody two contradictory and ambivalent poles: the good, sensible, and pleasing Lenù, necessarily blond as a long literary tradition demands, and the dark-

haired, demonic, and alluring Lila, who is “la bambina terribile e sfolgorante” (AG, 43; “the terrible, dazzling girl” [BF, 46]): “Io bionda, lei bruna, io tranquilla, lei nervosa, io simpatica, lei perfida, noi due opposte e concordi” (SBP, 144; “I fair, she dark, I calm, she anxious, I likable, she malicious, the two of us opposite and united” [SLC, 157]).<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the theme of the double is enigmatically predicted in the first volume’s epigraph, a citation from Goethe’s *Faust*, which hints at the menacing presence of a “waggish knave,” a “comrade...who works, excites, and must create, as Devil,” a brilliant fiend/friend, indeed, who is bound to goad, tempt and incite.<sup>13</sup> Actually, the lure of the ambivalent trope of the double serves as a useful access key for reading the Neapolitan quartet: Lila and Lenù – two in one, two sides of the same person – are two brilliant friends who were born the same year in a violent post-war working-class Neapolitan neighborhood. Lila is forbidden to continue her formal studies but remains the more brilliant of the two and decides to marry a local *camorrista* to climb the social ladder.<sup>14</sup> Lenù, instead, is allowed to study, joins the university intellectual milieu in northern Italian cities and marries a wealthy college professor. Lenù leaves Naples, while Lila stays. However, those who leave maintain an indissoluble bond with that “involuntary city” (Ortese 1994, 73), which is “an extension of the body,” a “matrix of perception” (F, 65), while those who stay will always be out-of-place, *smarginate* indeed.<sup>15</sup> Lila ends up working in a factory and then starts a computer business, while Lenù eventually becomes a successful writer. They become mothers, though both are reluctant and imperfect in this role; each has a daughter at the same time, doubled in the dolls they exchanged in their childhood. Lila’s daughter disappears, just as Lila vanishes without leaving any trace. Moved by the loss of her brilliant friend, Lenù as an old woman melancholically writes Lila’s story, which is probably her own story. The margin between self and other is finally crossed and sutured in a more self-conscious, liberated image of woman.<sup>16</sup>

This narrative circularity is symbolically represented by the protagonists’ dolls as they mark the beginning of the story with their disappearance as well as its ending with their eerie reappearance. In the epilogue of the last volume of *Storia della bambina perduta*, aptly titled “Restituzione” (“Restitution”), Lenù receives an unmarked package whose “ghostly” sender is undoubtedly Lila. Inside the mysterious box are Tina and Nu, the dolls that Lenù and her vanished friend had dropped into a neighbor’s cellar nearly six decades earlier, which they believed to have been stolen or lost. The dolls metonymically mirror the uncanny bond between

<sup>12</sup> I have discussed gothic doubles in literature and cinema in my book (Sarnelli 2013). On the double in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels, see Anna Maria Crispino (2014, 2019), and Lidia Curti (2016).

<sup>13</sup> “Signore: Ma sì, fatti vedere quando vuoi; non ho mai odiato i suoi simili, di tutti gli spiriti che dicono di no, il Beffardo è quello che mi dà meno fastidio. L’agire dell’uomo si sgonfia fin troppo facilmente, egli presto si invaghisce del riposo assoluto. Perciò gli do volentieri un compagno che lo pungoli e che sia tenuto a fare la parte del diavolo. J.W. Goethe, *Faust*” (AG, n.p.; “THE LORD: Therein thou’rt free, according to thy merits; The like of thee have never moved My hate. Of all the bold, denying Spirits, The waggish knave least trouble doth create. Man’s active nature, flagging, seeks too soon the level; Unqualified repose he learns to crave; Whence, willingly, the comrade him I gave, Who works, excites, and must create, as Devil” [BF, n.p.]).

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to point out that Lila marries Stefano because she sees him as different from his father don Achille, the loan shark who controls the black market of the neighborhood. Later she realizes that he is cut from the same cloth, as Stefano falls within the margins of the criminal fatherly figure.

<sup>15</sup> Tiziana de Rogatis has clearly explained this ambivalent antithesis between belonging and uprooting, whereas those who leave are indeed those who stay, while those who stay are constantly exiled from themselves (de Rogatis 2018).

<sup>16</sup> The reader and the author are also implicated in this doubling and blurring. The story we are reading is by Lenù/Ferrante who herself disappears, and it has become for us, in the “real” world, a spur to feminist analysis toward liberation.

the two friends.<sup>17</sup> The names of the dolls are significant in this respect: Tina is the name of Lenu's doll but also of Lila's daughter who goes missing. Nu is Lila's doll, but it is also a nickname for Lenù. The chiasmic relation between Tina/Lila/Lenù/Nu is a metaphor for the doubling and crossing of identities replicating themselves over time and space: "Forse quelle due bambole che avevano attraversato mezzo secolo ed erano venute fino a Torino, significavano solo che lei [...] aveva rotto gli argini" (SBP, 451; "Maybe those two dolls that had crossed more than half a century and had come all the way to Turin meant only that she [...] had broken her confines" [SLC, 473]). Indeed, the dolls represent the "only trace left by those who have lived to the fullest the destabilizing effects of *smarginatura*" (Fusillo 2016, my translation).<sup>18</sup> The Neapolitan quartet ends with Lila returning Tina, Lenu's doll, to her proper owner. But since she returns both dolls, she is symbolically giving "her-self" back to Lenù who can finally release her uncanny alter ego.<sup>19</sup> This ambivalence is condensed in the closing enigmatic words pronounced by Lenù (the narrator/writer): "A differenza che nei racconti, la vita vera, quando è passata, si sporge non sulla chiarezza ma sull'oscurità" (SBP, 451; "Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines toward obscurity, not clarity" [SLC, 473]).

Throughout the series of *L'amica geniale*, Lila's presence is mirrored not only in Lenù's life, but also in her literary endeavors. The mysterious and dazzling pages of *La Fata Blu* (*The Blue Fairy*) that Lila writes in her childhood represent in fact the secret core of Lenù's book *Un'amicizia* (SBP, 321; "A Friendship" [SLC, 339]), so much so that Lenù's writing would be unthinkable without her connection to her brilliant friend:

[S]entivo la necessità di [...] dirle: vedi come siamo state affiatate, una in due, due in una, e provarle [...] come il suo libro di bambina avesse messo radici profonde nella mia testa fino a sviluppare nel corso degli anni un altro libro, differente, adulto, mio, e tuttavia imprescindibile dal suo, dalle fantasie che avevamo elaborato insieme nel cortile dei nostri giochi, lei e io in continuità, formate, sformate, riformate. (SNC, 454)

(I felt the need to [...] tell her, you see how connected we are, *one in two, two in one*, and prove to her [...] how her child's book had put down deep roots in my mind and had, in the course of the years, produced another book, different, adult, mine, and yet inseparable from hers, from the fantasies that we had elaborated together in the courtyard of our games, she and I continuously formed, deformed, reformed. [SNN, 455])

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<sup>17</sup> I interpret the uncanny in the Freudian sense of the "doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self" (Freud, 234). It refers to a feeling of disquieting strangeness that occurs when something familiar turns out to be unfamiliar and therefore frightening. The double and the living doll represent the epitomes of the uncanny. Dolls recur prominently in most of Ferrante's works, not only in the Neapolitan Novels, but also in *The Lost Daughter* and *The Beach at Night*.

<sup>18</sup> "[Due] bambole che nell'inizio un po' fiabesco vengono inghiottite in uno scantinato buio, e che riappaiono nel finale, nella malinconia della vecchiaia, come unica traccia lasciata da chi ha vissuto fino in fondo l'effetto destabilizzante della smarginatura" (Fusillo 2016, 153).

<sup>19</sup> Mullenneaux provides a different interpretation of Lila's restitution of the dolls, by which she would be "giving back' their history together," thus "restoring an original bond" (Mullenneaux 2016).



The mirroring, doubling, and mutual emulation in life as well as in writing inevitably brings back to light the issue of translation, since a translation is certainly a narrative double, both the same/equivalent and other/different. In this respect, Rebecca Falkoff's critical elaborations on the parallelism between Raja-Ferrante and Lila-Lenù along with her interpretation of Lenù as a translator of Lila's texts and life prove illuminating, especially because these binaries are not truly distinct, but actually blended, and mutually informing. Falkoff's hypothesis about the identification of Elena Ferrante with Italian translator Anita Raja is based on the similarities between Raja's translation of Christa Wolf's novels and Ferrante's books.<sup>20</sup> In particular, *The Quest for Christa T* by Wolf describes a very similar friendship between the narrator Christa and her "brilliant" friend Christa T, whose disappearance triggers the narration. In Falkoff's analysis, Ferrante/Raja's relationship to the German writer, as a translator, would have inspired the literary friendship between Lila and Lenù. The translation of Wolf's novel, then, would be a primary source for Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels as it would prove crucial for the conception of Lila and Lenù's ambivalent relationship between rivalry and affection. Indeed, until the end of volume four Lenù is haunted by the disquieting idea that Lila might be writing a book far superior to her works, which in turn would become mere translations in a more standardized language, shadowy rewritings of Lila's texts. From this perspective, Lenù's books as translations (and the Neapolitan Novels reflexively) turn out to be a sort of "betrayal" as they

seem to perform the Italian aphorism "*tradurre è tradire*": to translate is to betray. They *translate* by rewriting Lila's lost pages, along with the Neapolitan dialect that is continually alluded to but virtually excluded from the tetralogy. They *betray* not only by dulling Lila's expressive force, or by rendering the experience of the neighborhood in a language with the potential to grant Elena access to a different social class, but also by their very existence, as Elena had promised Lila never to write about her. (Falkoff 2015)

The relationship between the narrator and the narrated, the translator and the translated, Lenù and Lila, (Raja-Ferrante and Wolf?) would reveal, therefore, the "horrific ambivalence of friendship" (ibid.), always played on the verge of contradictory feelings such as competition and desire, repulsion and attraction, envy and reparation, betrayal/guilt and restitution/creativity, all of which ultimately represent the true essence of the double.

On a formal, extratextual level, we could wonder what happens to this narrative double when the literary text is stripped down in the process of being transposed into a different medium, namely, when Ferrante's female characters cross from the borders of the page to the frame of the television screen. This process is metaphorically described in *Storia della bambina perduta*, when Lila and Lenù work together on writing a reportage about Naples. Symbiotically bonded in the creative process ("Le nostre teste urtarono – a pensarci, per l'ultima volta – l'una contro l'altra, a lungo, e si fusero fino a diventare una sola" SBP, 294; ["Our heads collided—for the last time, now that I think of it—one against the other, and merged until they were one"]

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<sup>20</sup> Falkoff, among others, has speculated that Anita Raja is behind the author's pseudonymous identity. Raja is the daughter of a Polish Jewish mother (born in Germany) and a Neapolitan father. She is a translator for Edizioni E/O (which has published all of Ferrante's works) and is best known for her Italian translations of German feminist writer Christa Wolf, whose books may have inspired Ferrante's novels. Stefania Lucamante has also discussed Wolf's influence on Ferrante. See Falkoff (2015); Lucamante (2008, 86).

(SLC, 312)), Lila teaches Lenù to use a new *medium*, the computer. Lenù is bewildered at the digital spectacle of the writing appearing on the screen as “luminous tremors”:

Cominciarono ad allungarsi segmenti abbaglianti, ipnotici, frasi che dicevo io, frasi che diceva lei, nostre discussioni volatili che andavano a imprimersi nella pozza scura dello schermo come scie senza schiuma. Lila scriveva, io ci ripensavo. Lei allora cancellava con un tasto, con altri faceva sparire un intero blocco di luce, lo faceva riapparire più su o più giù in un secondo...mosse fantasmatiche, ciò che è adesso o non c'è più, oppure è là... *La pagina è lo schermo*. (SBP, 293)

(Dazzling, hypnotic segments began to lengthen, sentences that I said, sentences that she said, our volatile discussions were imprinted on the dark well of the screen like wakes without foam. Lila wrote, I would reconsider. Then with one key she erased, with others she made an entire block of light disappear, and made it reappear higher up or lower down in a second. ... ghostly moves, what's here now is no longer here or is there. ...*The page is the screen*. [SLC, 311, emphasis mine])

By highlighting the potential of the written word to migrate from paper (the typewriter) to digital technology (the computer), this passage foreshadows the powerful possibilities of media transpositions. In this respect, if one considers *smarginatura* in its literal meaning as a printer's word that refers to removing the margins or trimming the edges of the page, then the Rai/HBO series adaptation of *L'amica geniale* by Saverio Costanzo (2018, 2020) can be considered an example of trans-media *smarginatura*.<sup>21</sup>

The phenomenon of transmediation is pervasive in contemporary cultural discussions and has become a cornerstone of the entertainment system as it is affected more and more by new digital media. Today's cultural industry is replete with stories and narratives that are told across a wide range of media, from novels and books to television series and feature films, web series, online blogs, games, and social media. These new forms of storytelling that expand through many media platforms have been defined as instances of “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins 2007). The expression refers to “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (ibid.). The “Ferrante Fever” phenomenon – an expression whose alliteration reproduces the mediatic echo of the writer across media, her worldwide success spreading within the high-brow culture industry with book translations in many languages, several adaptations for the cinema, the theatre and television, as well as hashtags on social media platforms – is part of this transmedia process and is symptomatic of what Richard Jenkins has defined as “convergence culture” (2006): a circulation of contents that are produced, distributed and received through multiple media forms and channels across transnational vectors.

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<sup>21</sup> The TV adaptation is an international co-production between Italy's Rai Fiction, TIMvision and the US network HBO with Italian production companies Fandango and Wildside and international film group Umedia. TIMvision withdrew from the project after the first season, while The Apartment and Mowe joined the production for the second season. The first two seasons were released in 2018 and 2020 respectively and the series is set to be continued.

In interpreting the concept of *smarginatura* as a literary and visual chronotope to signify border crossing, one questions whether the sense of dissolution of margins is a trait that is typically identifiable with the literary field. The inherent quality of words, in fact, allows the creation of discursive spaces which are multivalent and ambiguous by nature, as opposed to the visual world – especially television – where the images must provide the viewer with more identifiable contours in order to be effective. Therefore, the use of one medium instead of another can increase or weaken this relationship between *smarginatura* and border crossing. Ferrante herself discusses the dialectic between the written word of the book or the screenplay – which makes room for ambiguity and multiplicity of representations and interpretations – and the cinematographic or television work, where everything, from settings to characters, must have well-defined forms:

Tutto nell'opera cinematografica o televisiva, proprio tutto, dovrà avere un aspetto definito e definitivo: le vie, la chiesa, il tunnel, le case, le stanze, un'aula, i banchi. E tutti, proprio tutti, dovranno avere un corpo determinato. Questa inevitabile individuazione di ogni dettaglio avverrà fuori della sceneggiatura. Quanto al libro, resterà indietro, impassibile, mentre il film diventerà sempre più una delle sue possibili incarnazioni. (IO, 92)

(In the film or television version, everything, absolutely everything, will have to have a precise aspect: the streets, the church, the tunnel, the houses, the rooms, a classroom, the desks. And everyone, absolutely everyone, will have to have a particular body. This inevitable definition of every detail will happen outside the screenplay itself. As for the book, it will stay behind, imperturbable, while the film comes closer and closer to one of its possible incarnations. [II, 88])<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, the writer is aware of the creative possibilities of the written texts in their process of being translated across media.<sup>23</sup> The first season of the TV series *L'amica geniale* (2018) brings to the screen the first book of the Neapolitan Novels, staging Lila and Lenù's childhood and adolescence up to the final scene of Lila's wedding. It is a dazzling adaptation of the source material as it perfectly matches the novel's ability to portray the subtleties, emotions and thoughts of its protagonists. Like its source material, the TV adaptation represents a hybrid genre that, like a sort of metafictional *smarginatura*, crosses and dissolves the boundaries of genres. It can be defined an example of autobiography, biography, or "automythobiography" as it portrays events that are emblematic of the condition of women in southern Italy, whose emancipation rises to mythography or epic narrative (Curti 2016, 45); it also falls into the genre of soap opera, as the old-fashioned family photo tableaux showing the characters in the TV credits neatly suggests, as well as into the genre of realistic-domestic fiction, one that insists on

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<sup>22</sup> Here, Ferrante seems to articulate a strikingly conservative conception of cinema. Film is certainly fully capable of audacious and challenging ambiguity, citation, and a wide range of tropes, but these are usually minimized in products for mass consumption like popular commercial television.

<sup>23</sup> As Ferrante argues: "Grazie a un certo tipo di lettura specialistica (quella degli sceneggiatori, quella del regista) il romanzo passa dalla pagina allo schermo e nel corso di questo movimento perde la veste letteraria, si denuda. È questa nudità che mi confonde e insieme mi incuriosisce" (Carotenuto 2018; "Thanks to the specialist readings offered by screenwriters and directors, the novel migrates from the page to the screen and in the process it loses its literary appearance, it is stripped down. It is this nakedness that is confusing yet intriguing at the same time" [my translation]).

the intimate nature of violence; lastly, the TV series can be considered a refined experiment of dark fairy-tale, or neo-gothic melodrama.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, *L'amica geniale* is brimming with gothic tropes: ambivalent doubling, uncanny dolls, dark stairwells and basements, ogres, rape, murder, theft. The TV show inhabits an unstable limbo between neorealism and film *noir* or horror. Costanzo clearly states that his adaptation is deliberately anti-neorealist (Finos 2018). Conversely, horrific and gothic imagery permeates his adaptation. As Roberta Tabanelli has argued, the image of the “tiny animals” that in the novel is used to describe the violence and anger of the post-war Neapolitan periphery is transposed on the screen in a powerful horror scene in which swarms of repellent crawling bugs come out of the infectious recesses of a hellish subterranean Naples to invade houses and sleeping bodies at night (see Tabanelli 2019, 275).<sup>25</sup> Also, the dark fairy-tale elements of the novel are pushed to the edges of nightmarish horror. Indeed, the ogre is reincarnated in the figure of don Achille, the loan shark of the camorra-governed rione, perceived as a scary boogeyman by Lila and Lenù as they descend into his eerie cellar to recover their dolls, or when the little girls are filmed in a slow motion-like sequence while they go up the stairs to defy the threatening “monster” don Achille who stands behind the closed door as the neighborhood’s source of evil. These sequences pay tribute to Ferrante “[che ci] fa affacciare da ogni rigo per guardare di sotto e sentire la vertigine della profondità, la nerezza dell’inferno” (GA, 21; who “makes us look through every line, to gaze downward and feel the vertigo of the depths, the blackness of inferno” [DA, 22]).

This haunting perception of *smarginatura* (“the vertigo of the depths,” “the blackness of inferno”) is what both Lila and we as spectators feel while witnessing one of the most memorable scenes of domestic violence, in which the young girl is thrown out of the window by her father as punishment for her obstinate wish to continue her studies at school. This scene is only given a few sentences in the book;<sup>26</sup> however, in the TV adaptation the fall does not follow the same trajectory as described in the novel in dark fairytale-like terms. Rather, Lila is suddenly hurled out of the window and violently hits the ground like an object, producing a shocking, abrupt sound. The scene is compelling and disturbing as it elicits a sort of spectatorial

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<sup>24</sup> Directors Mario Martone and Roberto Faenza, who directed, respectively, the cinematic adaptations of *Troubling Love* and *The Days of Abandonment*, explain how Ferrante’s works have a screenplay-like quality and read “like a crime novel,” with “a strong scaffolding” in their narrative structure (Dursi 2017).

<sup>25</sup> “Da bambina mi sono immaginata animali piccolissimi, quasi invisibili, che venivano di notte nel rione, uscivano dagli stagni, dalle carrozze in disuso dei treni oltre il terrapieno, dalle erbe puzzolenti dette fetienti, dalle rane, dalle salamandre, dalle mosche, dalle pietre, dalla polvere, ed entravano nell’acqua e nel cibo e nell’aria, rendendo le nostre mamme, le nonne, rabbiose come cagne assetate. Erano contaminate più degli uomini, perché i maschi diventavano furiosi di continuo ma alla fine si calmavano, mentre le femmine, che erano all’apparenza silenziose, accomodanti, quando si arrabbiavano andavano fino in fondo alle loro furie senza fermarsi più” (AG, 33-34; “As a child I imagined tiny, almost invisible animals that arrived in the neighborhood at night, they came from the ponds, from the abandoned train cars beyond the embankment, from the stinking grasses called *fetienti*, from the frogs, the salamanders, the flies, the rocks, the dust, and entered the water and the food and the air, making our mothers and grandmothers as angry as starving dogs. They were more severely infected than the men, because while men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women, who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry flew into a rage that had no end” [BF, 38]).

<sup>26</sup> “La mia amica volò dalla finestra, passò sopra la mia testa e atterrò sull’asfalto alle mie spalle. Rimasi a bocca aperta. Ferdinando si affacciò continuando a strillare minacce orribili contro la figlia. L’aveva lanciata come una cosa” (AG, 78; “My friend flew out the window, passed over my head, and landed on the asphalt behind me. I was stunned. Fernando looked out, still screaming horrible threats at his daughter. He had thrown her like a thing” [BF, 76]).

*smarginatura* since the “dissolving margins” are ultimately “un’affacciarsi sul tremendo” (LF, 363; “When shapes lose their contours, we see what most terrifies us” [F, 373]). Strikingly, the scene is reminiscent of Woodman’s picture of herself as a young girl in the act of falling or jumping out of a window (fig. 7, displayed on the book cover of *La frantumaglia*). Woodman’s gloomy, black-and-white pictures with decaying backdrops are recalled vividly in the cinematic setting of *L’amica geniale* with its depiction of Naples’ grim, grey-toned outdoors and decrepit, claustrophobic interiors, thus representing another instance of transmedia cross-reference encompassing fiction, photography and cinema/television.



Fig. 7. Francesca Woodman, *House #3*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. Gelatin silver print. © 2020 Estate of Francesca Woodman/ Charles Woodman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. This image is not covered by this article’s CC BY-NC license.

In the second season of the TV series *Storia del nuovo cognome* (2020), which brings to the screen the second volume of the Neapolitan Novels, violent scenes with the same touching impact are still manifest. Set in the Naples of the ‘60s and ‘70s, the show follows Lenù (Margherita Mazzucco) and Lila (Gaia Girace) in their youth as they try to cope with the inexorability of their place of origin, marked by a Neapolitaness imbued with class and gender constraints. Lenù witnesses the parabolic turn of events of her friend as newly married while Lila tries to cross the confines of poverty, patriarchal control, and marital bond. Costanzo’s evocative directing visually re-mediate the poetics of *smarginatura* through a skillful “esercizi di regia sul perturbante,” (Innamorato, 2020; “exercise in orchestrating the uncanny” [my translation]), where the body becomes the primary tool for manipulating reality by unveiling its most obscure

side.<sup>27</sup> The sequence that frames Lila and Stefano’s first night of their honeymoon represents a horrific climax in this sense; the shot preceding the scene in which Stefano rapes his reluctant wife shows his face monstrously deformed as it appears multifaceted through the glass door of the bathroom where Lila is hiding. Costanzo successfully manages to represent Ferrante’s portrayal of *smarginatura* as strongly inflected by a gender perspective. When it refers to Lila’s perception of certain male bodies it takes on the features of disfigurement, deformity, brutality, and monstrosity; when it is identified as a self-perception (always female), it is portrayed as a form of fragmented self.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, during the viscerally frightening scene of sexual violence, a strategic perspective shot brings the viewer directly into Lila’s viewpoint as she lies on the bed like a dead, inanimate body in order to withstand the abuse, and in so doing she stages a sort of dissociated being. Her imaginary dissolution from herself and the surrounding world – her *smarginatura* – is indeed a subtle form of dissent that will allow her to cross several boundaries within the oppressive confines of her multiple roles as wife, mother, lover, brilliant entrepreneur and exploited factory worker.



Fig. 8. Saverio Costanzo, *L'amica geniale: Storia del nuovo cognome*, 2020, Still.

<sup>27</sup> An aesthetic deviation from this cinematic style is represented by episodes four and five, the only two out of eight episodes of the second season that are entirely directed by Italian director Alice Rohrwacher. Here, Lila and Lenù’s summer escape from Naples to the island of Ischia is shown through a tonal transition that replaces the dark and confining spaces of the city with a visual flourishing of bright colors, as well as luminous and open settings.

<sup>28</sup> Lila’s first episode of *smarginatura* during New Year’s Eve staged in season one is another exemplary moment in this sense. Framed in a hallucinatory atmosphere through a synesthetic representation of pyrotechnic explosions, fireworks, lighting, screams and faces all blurring into one another, Lila sees the contours of her brother’s body collapsing and his outlines turning vulgar and frightening. “Che le persone, ancor più delle cose, perdessero i loro margini e dilagassero senza forma è ciò che ha spaventato di più Lila nel corso della sua vita. L’aveva atterrito lo smarginarsi del fratello [...] Ho saputo solo dai suoi quaderni quanto l’avesse segnata la sua prima notte di nozze e come temesse il possibile stravolgersi del corpo del marito, il suo deformarsi [...] Specialmente di notte temeva di svegliarsi e trovarlo sformato nel letto, ridotto a escrescenze che scoppiavano per troppo umore, la carne che colava disciolta, e con essa ogni cosa intorno, i mobili, l’intero appartamento e lei stessa, sua moglie, spaccata” (SNC, 355; “That people, even more than things, lost their boundaries and overflowed into shapelessness is what most frightened Lila in the course of life. The loss of these boundaries in her brother [...] had frightened her [...] I learned how she feared the potential distortion of her husband’s body, his disfigurement [...] Especially at night she was afraid of waking up and finding him formless in bed, transformed into excrescences that burst out because of too much fluid, the flesh melted and dripping, and with everything around, the furniture, the apartment and herself, his wife, broken” [SNN, 355-356]).

Costanzo decomposes and reframes Ferrante's narrative material by composing shots within shots, *décollages* within collages (emblematically represented by Lila's photographic panel), thereby portraying Lila and Lenù's ambivalent relationship as well as their doubling. This is shown in a symbolic sequence framing each woman reflected on either side of the dividing line of a bifurcated mirror on the backdrop of Lila's bedroom (fig. 8). As soon as she crosses over to reach Lenù and help her to get dressed, Lila briefly disappears into the fold of the mirror, while Lenù looks at it and sees, for a brief moment, herself without Lila at her side. Sequences like these, where the two friends are framed as divided by the closet's glass doors or by the kitchen windows, are recurrent in the TV show.

The television adaptation carries out an audio-visual rendering that overflows from the borders of the source text. One of the most powerful images in Costanzo's haunting adaptation is a scene from the first volume's prologue not present in the novel, which introduces a supernatural vision typical of a ghost story/horror movie (see Tabanelli 2019, 274). Framing the entire series, the opening of the first episode in season one introduces the audience to a woman in her sixties, clearly identifiable as Lenù, sitting at a desk in a semi-dark room (fig. 9). She receives a call from Rino, Lila's son, who frantically informs her of his mother's disappearance. Nonchalantly, she dismisses him, undisturbed, as if she already knows about Lila's vanishing. In an uncanny succession of shots, she looks forward toward the camera, then toward a dark corner of the room, where the spectral figure of Lila as a child appears sitting in a rocking chair (fig. 10). An adult Lenù stares at the child Lila, who retroactively returns a defiant gaze before she stands up and walks away, dissolving into a dark hallway.

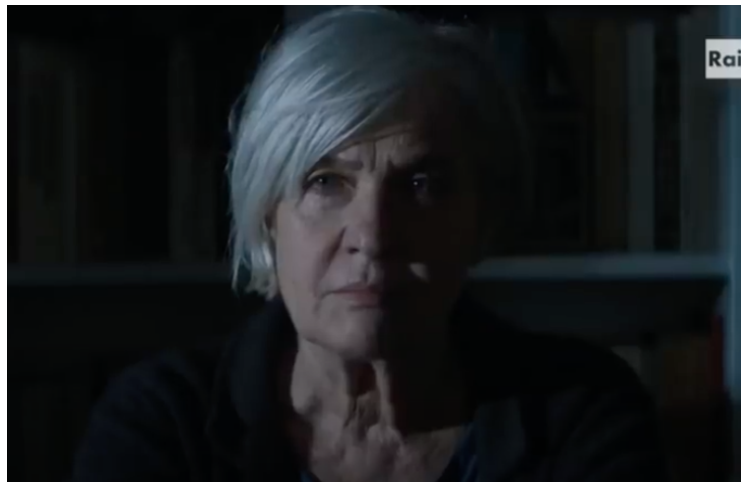


Fig. 9. Saverio Costanzo, *L'amica geniale*, 2018. Still.



Fig. 10. Saverio Costanzo, *L'amica geniale*, 2018. Still.

Hence, the double apparently does not split apart; rather, it is explored in-depth and enigmatically brought to light and staged on the screen. Indeed, by framing the entire TV series, the prologue, co-written by Costanzo and presumably Ferrante, conveys a subliminal message, which unveils the resilience of a feminine subject that on the verge of dissolving can claim “io non ci sto” (“I’m not here”), while the “other woman” begins to write – and therefore renegotiate – the story of her new self. As Ferrante declares:

La scomparsa delle donne non va interpretata solo come un crollo della combattività di fronte alla violenza del mondo, ma anche come rifiuto netto. C’è in italiano un’espressione intraducibile nel suo doppio significato: “io non ci sto”. Se presa alla lettera significa: io non sono qui, in questo luogo, di fronte a ciò che mi state proponendo di accettare. (LF, 317)

(The disappearance of women should be interpreted not only as giving up the fight against the violence of the world but also as a clear rejection. There is an expression in Italian whose double meaning is untranslatable: “*Io non ci sto.*” Literally, it means ‘I’m not here, in this place, before what you’re suggesting.’ [F, 327])

Ferrante’s writing is a fragmented storytelling of multiple *smarginature*, crisscrossed and reshaped by transnational as well as transmedia transpositions. The various modes of translation intersecting her literary works – within texts, between texts, across media – are positioned critically inside and outside the value of boundaries. Belonging and identity boundaries are crossed as Ferrante’s women are constantly on the edge of different subject positions: inside and outside geographical borders (between southern and northern Italy as well as between Italy and the United States); inside and outside class and social categories (between working class and middle class, women as entrepreneurs and/or intellectuals); inside and outside gender roles (mothers, wives, daughters), and inside and outside the ego (between self and other). Interrogating the margin, Ferrante’s work and its transmedia translations renegotiate complex and painful constructions of specifically feminine identities that challenge the cultural expectations of old “myths of Mediterranean origins” in a renewed conceptualization of



*smarginatura*. Rather than a dissolution or loss of margins, *smarginatura* proves to be a border crossing towards ambivalent forms of belonging, always indistinct and undefinable, along multiple intersections of gender, culture, and place.

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