



Staging (E)motions: The Importance of Elvira Notari's 'city films' for Twentieth-Century Immigrant and Female Audiences

by Eva Pelayo Sañudo

ABSTRACT: This article explores the significant social changes registered by woman film director Elvira Notari in her city films, particularly regarding the position of women and Italian immigrant audiences in the US. It thus suggests new readings of Notari's work through the concepts of urban capabilities and the *flâneuse*. As most of her original dense archive has been almost lost, only the extant feature film *È Piccerella* as well as secondary material and scholarship retrieving her work will be used to analyze the contributions of the director to cultural immigration, gender representation and film history.

KEYWORDS: Elvira Notari; city films; (e)motions; cultural immigration; gender representation



INTRODUCTION: AN UNUSUAL DIRECTOR

Elvira Notari (1875-1946) is a pioneering female film director whose cinema stands out not only as a forgotten forerunner to neo-realism, but also as an *alternative record* of social and cultural analysis due to its impact on female and immigrant imagery. It also offers disruptive views about gender roles and innovative models of cultural belonging for the immigrant audiences in the United States. Notari's work constituted a challenging counter-narrative to conventional notions such as the division between the public and the private, which is particularly relevant in addressing women's desire as well as helping the adaptation process of the Italian immigrant population overseas. Departing from critical charges about the moral degeneration of her artistic products, these were instead a basis of educational and emotional interest.

Existing work on Italian film studies and female spectatorship has already noted the importance of the general practice of moviegoing to unsettle social barriers. In addition, films as such are not simply consumed for entertainment but have a great power to reshape the reality and the mind. What is at stake in re-conceptualizing both migrant and female audiences through Notari's films is the particular emphasis on the politics and aesthetics of emotions, as a means of articulating both crucial concerns of the time and alternative collective images. Notari's influence on migrants' and women's roles will be shown by bringing to the foreground her invaluable contributions, such as creating a niche for the memory of immigrant spectators abroad and expanding urban geography for women. Thus, this article will draw on multiple research fields—diaspora, ethnic, cinema, urban and gender studies—to elucidate how her work played a role in shaping the contexts of migrant and female spectatorship, particularly in relation to official immigration policies and traditional gender norms. To do so, this article will expand readings of Notari's work through the concept of urban capabilities by Saskia Sassen and studies on the figure of *flâneuse*.

Acclaimed as the first Italian woman film director, Elvira Notari also stands out for her abundant artistic production, which documents the "body" of the urban (Bruno, *Streetwalking*), and addresses excluded subjects, such as women and migrants, at the turn of the twentieth century. Notari's work registers the significant contribution of women and immigrants in a particular time of great historical and political importance to the codification of the cities of Naples and New York. Thus, this article explores the way in which her so-called "city films" (Bruno, "City Views"), featuring poverty and outcasts, represent an alternative record to official discourses both in Italy and the United States. On the one hand, her work was highly criticized or even censored by fascist authorities, which resented dialectal representation and that such a grim or anti-celebratory image of *Italianness* was promoted abroad (Miscuglio). On the other hand, both the creation and reception of Notari's films also tackle the American nativist phase, particularly during the 1920s, which entails immigrants' marginalization and assimilation.

Notari provided the audiences with more general but equally illustrative and disruptive counter-narratives. Notably, the cinema by this film pioneer is said to challenge conventional notions such as the division between public and private



spheres, which becomes especially pertinent when addressing women's desire. In turn, this spatial reconfiguration also had important implications for the cultural codes and adaptation process of the Italian immigrant population in the United States. In this sense, Notari's work departs from criticism about the moral degeneration of her films in that these were recognized at the time as a fundamental basis of educational and emotional interest (Tomadjoglou).

MASS MOVEMENTS: ITALIAN IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Otherwise a common visual record, Notari's work is credited a high value in terms of what Giuliana Bruno, the best-known expert on this director, calls a "transit archive" (*Streetwalking*, 133; *Atlas of Emotion*, 53-54). Recent scholarship is abundant in showing and analyzing the work by Neapolitan artists in the US, who became particularly prominent in the field of music, for example. Giuliana Muscio's *Napoli/New York/Hollywood* also examines the important role of cinema in representing immigration. Notwithstanding cinema is almost by definition a global industry that is constructed through migration, Notari's particular cross-Atlantic production is directly engaged with Italian migration history. Specifically, it facilitated the migration of cultural codes and immigrant settlement at a marked time of mass population movements.

Although the application of the term has been much debated, several factors make historian Donna Gabaccia in *Italy's Many Diasporas* recognize Italian migration as fitting the definitions of a diaspora. These reasons include the magnitude of the phenomenon of migration, its continuance in time, its transnational and enforced character, and its impact on identity formation. Today, many identify the current 140 million figure of displaced people across the world as signaling an unprecedented migration—together with the technological revolution and general transportation speed (products, information, communication)—of the phenomenon that is known as globalization. Yet, the mass migrations of the end of the nineteenth century—in which Italians are included with twenty-seven million emigrants in total—supposed no less scope if properly considered within its historical perspective. These earlier migrations arguably correspond to a period of globalization numerically comparable with the scales of today's vaunted global era, given that 125 million people were "internationally mobile" in a world that had half the population of the present world (Gabaccia and Leach 1-2).

The case of the Italian/American experience spostulates an examination of the paradigm of the Italian diaspora,¹ as represented by the collective imaginary through the influence of popular films and songs that mostly represent migration towards the United States (Paternostro). Nevertheless, the Italian diaspora had a considerable impact on South America, particularly Argentina, the part of the continent which today

¹ I am following Anthony J. Tamburri's (1991) cautions on the ideological charge of the hyphen and using instead his proposed slash when 'Italian American' is employed as an adjective.



has a larger number of Italian descendants (Cappiello). It was also directed to Canada, Australia and—a less-known fact—Europe, with about one million emigrants more within the continent, in Italy's centennial history of emigration, than in its transoceanic counterparts (Sassen, *Guests and Aliens* 68-69). In the United States, a large portion of Italians initially settled in California from the mid-nineteenth century, following the opportunities of the Gold Rush. However, most Italian immigrants settled in the East coast (New York and Philadelphia) and in Chicago at the moment of the first peak migration in the history of the US, the turn of the twentieth century.

Over five million Italians emigrated to the United States from the last quarter of the nineteenth century until the interwar period, when they had to face the country's restrictive immigration laws (Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*; Petit; Perlmann). At a time when legislation against immigration and assimilationist policies were strong in the US, Elvira Notari's films fulfilled an important adaptive function by falling within the category of migrating objects. This "cultural migration" resulted in the creation in 1905 of the transatlantic Neapolitan–New York film company Dora Film (Bruno, *Streetwalking*). She produced on commission for New York-based immigrants that desired to remember their cities of origin and whose revenues went back to Italy. As mentioned earlier (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 133; *Atlas of Emotion* 53-54), her work considerably helped immigrant cultural adaptation and settlement. The possibility of establishing a connection to their homeland satisfied a crucial emotional function, which is in part explained by the specificity of Italian migration and the return rate. Rather than immigrants, Italians conceived of themselves as *soujourners* and, in fact, from the years of the earliest waves until the First World War, more than half returned. According to Muscio, immigrants' fervent desire to return home accounted for their attachment to tradition as well as accelerated their industriousness, resourcefulness and productivity to blend their current situation with their culture or expectations. She specifically emphasizes the hope of return over the too-common American dream, the "Neapolitan Dream—a mythical return", which speaks volumes about the specificity of Italian migration history (Muscio 1-20).

Notari not only directed but also wrote almost sixty features and hundreds of short films. Unfortunately, her abundant filmic archive is almost completely lost,² since only three of her feature films remain today.³ It is a "ruined and fragmentary map," according to Bruno (*Streetwalking*), who tries to reclaim Notari's rightful place within Italian and worldwide cinema tradition, especially regarding silent and neorealist history as well as women's production. This scholar is compelled to use a very complicated "archaeological intertextual approach," as she affirms that "owing to the status of the

² "Researching the lost cinema of Elvira Notari" is the Italian translation given to Giuliana Bruno's monographic study of the director: *Rovine con vista: Alla ricerca del "cinema perduto" di Elvira Notari* (1995).

³ Cruzado-Rodriguez, "Elvira Notari". These three extant films are *È piccerella* (1921), *A santanotte* (1922) and *Fantasia 'e surdato* (1927). The former is easily available online while only some minutes of the second are accessible via streaming. In general, however, we can retrieve the directors' surviving cycle through cultural events or *mostras*, such as the one dedicated in 2016 to the cities Notari inhabited, her hometown Salerno, Napoli e Cava de' Tirreni: *La film di Elvira: Elvira Coda Notari, La Prima Donna Regista Del Cinema Italiano (1875/1946)*.



documentation, the existing texts can be represented only through their fictional referents, adapted or cited" (*Streetwalking* 5).

Yet, the director can also be approached from the point of fields other than cinema and women's history, namely ethnic and urban studies. For example, Notari's record constitutes an indisputable early example of the complex transnational nature of migrations, the perspective of mingling identities and managing affiliation to more than one country which is today commonly adopted when studying contemporary immigrant groups such as the Latino population in the US, among others. In fact, we can situate Notari's work as adding to the acknowledged role of culture to forge an ethnic and transnational identity, mostly through music and particularly the distinctly urban and popular Neapolitan song. In *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York* (2014), Simona Frasca examines both Neapolitan songs and artists who had travelled back and forth during the years of mass migration at the turn of the century and were responsible for the cross-cultural diffusion and influence between Italy and the US. Furthermore, drawing on Muscio, immigrant actors and musicians were not ordinary birds of passage but did enjoy a privileged mobility since "they did not need a visa, and when they entered the United States they did not undergo the scrutiny that immigrants were subjected to on Ellis Island" (1-20).

Beyond the entertainment value that music inevitably held for immigrants in every public place of the Little Italies, it contributed to ethnic and transnational identification. The same role is attributed to cinema:

The Italian immigrant stage, at the core of this culture, was for a long time a crucial cultural institution within the diasporic communities in the United States, and most of all in New York, where the Southern Italian diaspora was most numerous. Immigrants actors held the community together from a linguistic and cultural point of view. (Muscio, Napoli/New York/Hollywood 1-20)

Apart from the artists, artistic products themselves could fulfil this important function. Notari's films also travelled to New York, some of which even faster than to Northern Italy, helping immigrant audiences "as the speed of film 'transference' added a dimension of simultaneous communication to the historical and imaginary connection between the two cities" (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 125). More characteristically, Notari's huge success in New York is explained because of the healing or cultural negotiation her films meant in confront with the division of spheres, which had intensified in the American industrial context and with the growing urbanization (Domosh and Seagar 5).

On the one hand, as in Italy, cinema in general became the modern meeting place and a primary form of social exchange, which also allowed women the opportunity to venture beyond the home. On the other, Notari's work particularly provided an "imaginary binding" through what Bruno identifies as an "ethics of passion" (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 131). She states that



Notari's textual sphere was the public domain of private passions. At the level of imaging, experience, emotions, sentiments, sexuality—all elements of the private sphere—were heightened. Yet the emotional sphere was 'publicly' displayed in the city's space: as part of the theatricality of Neapolitan popular culture, the private dimension would constantly become a social event as the personal was staged in, and for, a public. These films thus triggered intense personal/social identification in the social milieu of the movie theater, offering a fictional reconciliation of the split between private and public. (*Streetwalking* 131)

In this way, Notari's work is said to promote both a personal and a social form of subjectivity, which are crucial in aiding Italian cultural adaptation abroad. Another important contribution, as well as innovation, is made by the description given by Notari's son, Edoardo, "an actor in all his mother's films" (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 47). While it is normally emigrants who send back remittances and letters to the motherland, here it is Italy the one to provide for such a support. Edoardo identifies her mother's films as "animated postcards," which through the vividness of the filmic form better ensure the reception "of an Italy observed, (re)constructed, transferred abroad" (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 132–133). More importantly, this reception attests to the capabilities of immigrants, who are often presumed marginalized and "disorganized," as early social theory established (Park; Handlin; Lutters and Ackerman).

For example, the psychosocial analysis predominant in the influential Chicago School has clear resonance in Italian/American history and its enduring stereotypes: anomie, uprootedness, social disorganization and, hence, primitiveness. This early sociology was one of "contrasting types or an evolutionary trajectory" that is today heavily contested (Lefebvre qtd. in Jayaram 4). Robert Redfield is one of the key figures who grounded an antithetical or binary methodology; he standardized descriptions of social analysis by searching for "ideal types" and formulating definitions based on the "contrast provided by modern urban society" in his *The Folk Society* (1947, 294). He labelled such modernization or evolutionary path for immigrants by coining the folk-urban continuum, which echoes Rudolph Vecoli's critique (1964) of Oscar Handlin's famous *The Uprooted* (1951) for his idealization of a peasant society that did not exist and that "fail[ed] to respect the unique cultural attributes of the many and varied ethnic groups which sent immigrants to the United States" (Vecoli 404). Handlin set out to explore "the effect upon the newcomers of their arduous transplantation," which he defines as "a history of alienation" for the difficulty to adjust to a new world (4). By considering the importance of the cultural specificities of Southern Italian peasants or *contadini* and their particular adjustment in Chicago, Vecoli counteracts many of the assumptions made by Handlin and Redfield about European immigrants arriving in US cities. Regarding the disorganization and "breakdown of families" associated with "the development of the city and modern industry" (Redfield 308), Vecoli shows how *contadini* better adjusted thanks to their characteristic "chains of migration" and strong network and kinship systems (407):

The enthusiasm Notari's cinema generated amongst Italian-origin immigrants also evidences that they were able to find a way to keep ties to their mother-tongue and motherland in a distinctively nativist period. For instance, apart from general and strong anti-immigration sentiment, the population from East and South Europe in particular



was legally restricted through the national origins quota system of the 1920s. As historians Philip V. Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer contend, discriminatory measures, enacted through The Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, and “directed against the two largest and most stigmatized of these nationalities—Jews and Italians [...], served as a *de facto* legal codification of the Americanization movement, which was intended to replace as quickly as possible the original immigrant cultures—and especially the languages—with Anglo-Saxon culture and English” (9).

Notari’s archive therefore offers an interesting source of unconventional knowledge and site of creativity and agency by representing subjects living on the margins. Up to 700 short films by Notari were created on commission, showing how Italian immigrants transformed themselves from viewers into creators and producers (Bruno, “City Views”). The first focus was Naples, their place of origin, particularly in the form of documentaries that acted like “pieces of memory tailored to their wishes,” but later they asked for stories on the Italian/American experience specifically (Bruno qtd. in Cruzado-Rodriguez, 45; my translation). Such practices thus lie within contemporary social models, such as that of urban capacities by Saskia Sassen to stress that powerlessness is not an absolute category. “Under certain conditions,” it contains the possibility of significant political and historical, of ‘making the civic,’ as the scholar notes’ (“Urban Capabilities”, 84-85). Although Sassen analyzes protest movements in our global and digital era, her framework of differentiation, between powerlessness and invisibility or impotence, proves also useful to understand this early period of mass migration, urban development, and imaginary configurations.

The role of cities in terms of visual representation and, especially, of imaginary identification and as places of desire, is paramount in films and visual arts. Therefore, the cityscape is an asset to cinema, which has historically captured the very ‘essence’ and power of certain cities. As Bruno reports in “City Views: The Voyage of Film Images,” New York and Naples share a strong “migratory tie” but also “a filmic connection;” they are “parallel places” in terms of metropolitan rise and, especially, of a characteristic development as what she terms “cine-cities.” For Bruno, “Not all cities are cinematic. Naples and New York are intrinsically filmic. Photogenic by way of nature and architecture, they attract, and respond well to, the moving image. They have housed the cinema from its very first steps and have a shared history as cine-cities” (*Streetwalking* 47). In other words, New York and Naples are inherently visual, restless cities. Accordingly, the cinematic capture is about motion and pictures, which links them at the same time with their conjunctural, peak history of transit due to migration and to their centrality as harbours of commercial and human exchange.

NEW MOVEMENTS: WOMEN AND (ITALIAN) CINEMA

Notari is considered to have pre-dated neorealism as she recorded in and from the Neapolitan streets. Even at the time, her work was acclaimed and presented in the US as “colossal” pieces of “Italian cinematography” (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 47). Yet, Notari’s films also supposed an antagonism to Italy’s national policies during these years, being



subject to rewriting by fascist censorship, which rejected her dialectal and regional cultural expressions. The depiction of poverty and the popular was particularly objected, since this representation contrasted with the triumphant image of Italy that the regime desired to export, particularly among the “Italiani all'estero,” as immigrants were conceived during Fascism, and who were key to mobilize political support abroad (Cannistraro and Meyer 53).

In addition, while Notari's portrayal of the “plebeian metropolis” of Naples, as Pasolini identified it (Pasolini qtd. in Bruno, “City Views” 50; Bruno, *Streetwalking* 38), is emblematic of neorealism, the treatment of women, the private and even melodrama (Bayman), is decidedly revolutionary and controversial. In spite of the fact that many of the main characters end up in tragedy or madness, sexual and urban desire go hand in hand for women (Scalia). The affirmed lack of separation between the public and the private in Notari's work is rendered as a hunger for spatial exploration or escape on the part of female characters (Scalia), as well as by publicly exposing private and visceral dramas which are highly erotic and emotional (Bruno, *Streetwalking*).

Melodramatic scripts and unhappy, doomed women characters were also central to one of the genres of Italian cinema at the beginning of the century, dialectal or regional cinema, which had its best representative in the city of Naples, coining more precisely the genre of Neapolitan cinema (Cruzado-Rodriguez). This is nurtured out of ‘the body of urban popular culture,’ by recording in the squares and streets and featuring real people and situations, a material which is presented back to large audiences (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 5). Despite the popularity of cinema stars already, Notari chose non-professional actors, distancing herself from the contemporary tendency to the spectacular in Italian cinema and recreating instead the poverty and hardships of the lowest classes. For this reason, she is posited as a forerunner to neorealism, a cinematic genre greatly linked to the city too, as in the critique or anti-thesis to modernity (Shiel).

It is the Neapolitan popular sentiment, however, which is deeply impressed through the incorporation of music and live songs that are often the very origin and inspiration of her films. In the 1920s, Notari's texts were written, directed and produced for a reception apparatus defined as “‘film performance’ [for the way in which] they reveal an internal musical rhythm where sound seems to conduct image” (Bruno qtd. in Cruzado-Rodriguez, “Elvira Notari” 43, my translation). The director also draws on social chronicles of the time in her desired attempt to represent and involve her audiences. Hence her use of melodrama featuring crimes of passion, stories of treason and incommensurable suffering. She not only registers extreme human feelings but also manifests a preference for the female condition (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 5), showing an interest in female desire and gender constraints, although a favourite is the figure of transgression portrayed by crazy and seductive women. Men usually lack autonomy and are overpowered by their mothers or wives, while women are sexually and socially liberated. However, women do often pay for it with the conventional narrative punishment, as is the case in *O festino e a Legge* (1921) or *È piccerella* (1922). More particularly, *È Piccerella*, translated as *A Little Girl's Wrongs* and one of her most successful films, has a very typical plot: firstly, it features a fatal but infantilized woman embodying



that trope of volubility, as in the (in)famous proverb *donna è mobile qual piuma al vento*; secondly, there are two rivalling suitors and, finally, the film reproduces the tragic ending for the female character. As the advertisement runs in the Italian version,

In the story, it is motherly love which finally triumphs by forgiving the son, Tore Spina, mad because of the fatal love of a woman [Margaretella] who easily gives away her love and who takes pleasure in destroying men's hearts. Tore Spina, whom passion has maddened to the point of pushing him to committing a crime, suffers a lot, while the deceiving woman (no name) tries to convince him of her love. (Tomadjoglou n.p.; my translation)

The story clearly abides by that general appreciation that men are weak victims of capricious women, who are compared to exemplary mothers. Contemporary critics agree that Notari's female characters are depicted according to the customary dualism whereby the rebel heroine of her films is juxtaposed to and finally diminished by female figures embodying socially accepted roles of womanhood. In fact, the English version of the ad explicitly places all responsibility on women themselves, who are interpellated in a "warning to mothers: the moral of this picture should be heeded by every mother who sees it. This might have been your daughter. Some girls go wrong when mothers are careless. Guard your own daughter from a fate like this" (Tomadjoglou n.p.). Most of the written script of the film gives credit to these interpretations. Early on the film, the character conveys her refusal of conventional love tied to compromise sooner or later: "this love must end. It has already been too long. A marriage is impossible" (Notari, *È Piccerella* 15' 28"). Later on, Margaretella is verbally described as trying to persuade her lovers through emotional blackmail to acquire rather superfluous or interested rewards such as money for the hairdresser. By doing so, Margaretella is additionally fitting the traditional position of women as an object as she uses the argument that a friend of hers is truly loved on the grounds that 'l'innamorato', the suitor, takes good care of such expenses. Tore then immediately promises that she will surpass the friend in luxury, all in exchange for a kiss, since this is what keeps him alive.

All in all, as the film's title clearly underlines, Margaretella is rendered as a whimsical child, hence fulfilling the trope of female infantilization which normally serves to justify paternalistic treatment including dependence on others, close surveillance and, of course, moral judgement. By contrast, Tore's mother is in despair thinking about the ghost of debt as well as ill reputation given that he has spent all of his money on a 'sgualdrinella', another man's lover (23' 58"). As Annabella Miscuglio has noted, the mother figure in Notari's dramas usually plays the role of reestablishing society's rules or order, particularly in relation to the female protagonists who are supposed to have brought about scandal, which results in a "polarization of forces" (153). Miscuglio also polarizes gender differences by reducing women's roles in Notari's films to the category of "temptresses, seductresses and expert vamps" while "weak men [are] ready to risk damnation by committing the most horrendous crimes for their sakes" (153) When Tore accuses Margaretella of being 'nfama,' an unfaithful woman, he fully assumes the role of the victim and asks her to kill him (Notari, *È Piccerella* 40' 09"). Men's vulnerability in women's hands is further emphasized by commenting how, even after facing the evidence, "poor wandering soul, he turned back to her being more of a slave



and acquiescent than before" (40' 34"). The irony is, obviously, that Margaretella is the one to be killed by her jealous lover, thus meeting the fatal destiny of what is too-well known, and for a time legally justified for men, as *delitto d'onore*.

Therefore, this type of plot was not unusual to the public at the time and, ultimately, did not seem to offer many alternatives from a feminist perspective. This could be explained either as an effect of a realist portrayal in which women had certainly no real choices or, as is the case for many female creators, the director's own "conflict between a desire or freedom and her family role" (Miscuglio). However, coexisting with powerful narrative structures which punish rebellious women with no other than murder, Notari's work suggests some other promising readings and alternative imaginaries: she registers or addresses women's increasing access to urban and cinematic pleasure, as well as articulates new modes of representation in relation to women's subjectivity.

Different scholars have remarked the fact that Notari dares not only to represent and contest the prison of the private realm for women, but also to inscribe women's experience of the city and their pleasure in spatial exploration in a way that has been culturally and socially denied (Bruno, *Streetwalking*; Scalia). For example, feminist studies have wondered if the figure of the *flâneuse* really exists (Bruno, *Streetwalking* Collie; Carrera-Suárez), since a woman in the public sphere is inevitably conceived as a public woman (as a streetwalker), one who is *an object of pleasure* for the *flâneur* rather than a subject who enjoys the (privileged) position of an observer. In this respect, Notari's characters redress the condition of women both physically and symbolically as desiring subjects. The reason that they come to be doomed by the end results precisely from the social sanction of women's quest for sexual and spatial explorations. In "Elvira Notari: A Woman in Search of Desire" (2013), Rossella Scalia discusses Notari's use and attraction for the street, particularly as a site that represents female forbidden desire. She thus compares, for instance, the character and the fate of Margaretella in *È piccerella* to the woman in *La Lupa* (1880) or 'the man-eater,' by the best-known Italian verist writer Giovanni Verga, for the way in which their 'sexual desire and spatial unrest' are demonized in the eyes of the villagers (Scalia). According to Bruno, "in her desire to trespass, she [Margaretella] is not alone. A universe of girlfriends surrounds her, creating a female complicity to escape women's lack of spatial freedom" (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 286). By contrast, in Verga's short story both the patriarchal delineation of gender spheres and the absence of female solidarity are established from the onset. The main character is particularly despised by other women who are set apart as rivals for their exclusive allegiance to men:

In the village they called her the She-Wolf, because she never had enough—of anything. The women made the sign of the cross when they saw her pass, alone as a wild bitch, prowling about suspiciously like a famished wolf; with her red lips she sucked the blood of their sons and husbands in a flash, and pulled them behind her skirt with a single glance of those devilish eyes. (Verga 3)



Bruno also emphasizes that Notari's filmic geography consists of what she calls the "spatial tension of desire," that is "the bridge between the private and public realms (*Streetwalking* 6). Bruno explicitly affirms, therefore, that her study *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* 'intends to foreground' how spatial practice and representation function to articulate or inscribe desire therein, particularly female desire (6). For instance, "[m]apping out early film reception," she demonstrates how the "female gaze" also participates of the "pleasures of travel(oguing)" that cinema enables at this time (6). Both on the screen and in theater attendance, women may enjoy an "erotic territory" previously forbidden (6). From the eighteenth century, with the European photography and literary tradition of travelogues and panoramic geography, Italy and Naples in particular become a hub for travelers and artists alike, as is proved by the emergence of a local school known as *vedutismo* (Bruno, *Streetwalking*; "City Views"). Cinema is born within this intense "visual culture" and increases the love of travelling and wandering, as well as of the 'aerial gaze' previously enabled with the *vedute* (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 210–211) since the spectacular arcade where the film is projected, the surrounding cafes, and the whole city and its people become a form of 'optical consumption' in themselves (47). Furthermore, in the light of the mentioned visual history of the city of Naples, its touristic force attraction such as with the Grand Tour is mostly continued through film. According to Bruno,

[f]rom the very beginning, film was a form of imaging, and a way of touring, the city. Early Neapolitan cinema participated intensely in the construction of 'city views.' There was even a genre devoted to viewing the city: it was called *dal vero*, that is, shot from real life on location. (48)

Yet, rather than a static projection of the city, it was obviously its 'nomadic dimension' that captivated the cinematic medium (47). In a way, Bruno notes, that intrinsic relationship between cinema and the city is anticipated in the writings of Roland Barthes and Charles Baudelaire for the way in which the *flâneur* and the film spectator are rendered as conflate figures. Contrary to their male literary figures, thanks to cinema women may now participate of "urban and spectatorial *flânerie*" in ways that were unimaginable (45). "Before the entrance of cinema into the world of spectacle," some of the penalties for women occupying public spaces included that "like prostitutes, [they] were forced to live outside the city limits:" (41)

the 'peripatetic' [*peripatetica* for prostitute in Neapolitan, from *passeggiatrice* in Italian] gaze of the *flâneur* is a position that a woman has had to struggle to acquire and to liberate from its connotations of social ostracism and danger [...] Cinema plays an important role in this process. The 'institution' of cinema (that is, the act of going to the movies and its viewing space) historically legitimized for the female subject the denied possibility of public pleasure in leisure time [...] Going to the cinema triggered a liberation of the woman's gaze [...] textually and contextually, literally and figuratively, historically and fantasmatically. (41)

Although Bruno admits that it is "a journey in slow motion" for women to walk, travel or attend cinema alone, she concludes that "female spectatorship triggers, and



participates, in women's conquest of the sphere of spatial mobility as pleasure" (51). In this sense, Elvira Notari is registering a paramount transformation in the socio-sexual dynamics of her time, documenting the changes brought by the cinema as well as addressing the main subjects of that new experience, given that "[i]t was mostly women, as well as workers and marginal people, who experienced modernity's startling change—mobility" (52). Even in the US a larger part of her films were watched by female immigrant audiences. Apart from entailing a new presence and experience of the urban, the "pervasive eroticism" that the cinematic environment embodies is also accessed by women to a certain extent (53). This change and the corresponding anxieties are signaled by the existence of film magazines and tragicomedies commenting on the "erotic adventures" of women "leav[ing] the house to go to the movies" (53). For these reasons, Notari's city films are so in terms of representing not only city people and settings, but also the city's own and profound transformation.

Lastly, while the expression of excess in "violence, love and the physicality of desire" is a Neapolitan cinematic aesthetics, Notari is considered to have mastered it (21). As a result, in Notari's work the exposure of both female desire and visceral dramas out of the accustomed private space is in itself revolutionary. In other words, it is not simply that women find liberation from the corseted roles of mothers and wives in the city, and an opportunity for sexual and sensual exploration, as I have explained. The fact that the erotic and the emotional are also publicly exposed has important consequences in blurring and disrupting powerful discursive binaries and material realms of division. In turn, this approach is not limited to a more inclusive analysis of gender. The focus on personal and private dimensions also helped Italian immigrant adaptation abroad and—as a whole—was purposefully taken out of a will to address what Notari felt as her audience's live experiences. Notari's alternative record articulates key changes in immigration, gender and the urban through the lens of the also new phenomenon of cinema, by staging (e)motions that both retake a rich lived and popular tradition and open the perspective of 'the script'.

CONCLUSIONS

If, a new history of Italian Americans is being continuously updated due to former exclusions or omissions based on gender, among others, Notari is a rich source to consider. As William J. Connel notes, "the serious appreciation of the role of women and of issues involving gender in the Italian American experience dates from the late 1970s and 1980s" (7). As a consequence, the discipline of history cannot always account for some important gaps: "Statistics revealed little about women and their lives, and the non-Italian visitors in the 1900s who described the Little Italies had few interactions with women who lived there" (7). Although these absences have been substantially corrected by the contributions of gender historians such as Donna Gabaccia and Jennifer Guglielmo, the value of artistic products is undisputed. Connel himself admits that, from the change marked by the 1970s, "pushing beyond statistics to look at



women's memoirs and novels by and about Italian American women as historical sources became a new priority" (7).

Drawing on Connel, literary critics have greatly helped us to understand the history of Italians in the US, while the gender perspective continues to be crucial when reading contemporary novels as well as films about Italian Americans. In the light of this evidence, a reinterpretation of Notari's work adds to these attempts to revise our understanding of immigrants' and women's history.

WORKS CITED

- Bayman, Louis. *The Operatic and the Everyday in Postwar Italian Film Melodrama*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- Bruno, Giuliana. *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. Verso, 2007.
- . "City Views: The Voyage of Film Images." *The Cinematic City*, edited by David Clarke. Routledge, 1997. pp. 47-61.
- . *Rovine con vista: Alla ricerca del "cinema perduto" di Elvira Notari*. La Tartaruga, 1995.
- . *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. Princetown UP, 1993.
- Bruno, Giuliana, and Maria Nadotti. *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy*. Routledge, 2014.
- Cannistraro, Philip V., and Gerald Meyer, editors. *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism: Politics, Labor and Culture*. Praeger, 2003.
- Carrera-Suárez, Isabel. "The Stranger *Flâneuse* and the Aesthetics of Pedestrianism: Writing the Post-Diasporic Metropolis." *Interventions* vol. 17, no. 6, 2015, pp. 853-865.
- Collie, Natalie. "Walking in the City: Urban Space, Stories, and Gender." *Gender Forum* 42, 2013, pp. 3-15.
- Connel, William J. "A New History for a New Millenium." *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, edited by William J. Connell and Stanislao G. Pugliese. Routledge, 2018. pp. 1-15.
- Cruzado-Rodriguez, Ángeles. "Elvira Notari: Unos ojos Napolitanos detrás de la cámara." *Italia-España-Europa: Literaturas comparadas, tradiciones y traducciones*, edited by Mercedes Arriaga Florez, et al.. Arcibel, 2006. pp 40-47.
- Domosh, Mona, and Joni Seagar. *Putting Women into Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*. The Guilford Press, 2001.
- È Piccerella*. Directed by Elvira Notari, Film Dora 1921, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT6dpEIN-eA>. Accessed 22 Feb. 2019.
- Ferrara, Orazio. *Addio Sud: O briganti o emigranti*. Capone, 2012.
- Frasca, Simona. *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York*. Palgrave, 2014.
- Gabaccia, Donna. *Italy's Many Diasporas*. Taylor & Francis, 2000.



---. "Women of the Mass Migration: From Minority to Majority, 1820–1930." *European Migrants. Global and Local Perspectives*, edited by Dirk Hoerder and Leslie P. Moch. Northeastern UP, 1996. pp. 90-111.

Gabaccia, Donna, and Colin Wayne Leach, editors. *Immigrant Life in the U.S.: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives*. Routledge, 2004.

Gardini, Walter. *Syria Poletti: mujer de dos mundos*. Asociación Dante Alighieri, 1994.

Immigrant Son: The Story of John D. Mezzogiorno. Directed by Frank Cappiello. Lux Vista Films, DVD, 2012.

Lutters, Wayne G., and Mark S. Ackerman. "An Introduction to the Chicago School of Sociology." *Interval Research Proprietary*, 1996.

Miscuglio, Annabella. "An Affectionate and Irreverent Account of Eighty Years of Women's Cinema in Italy." *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy: Seminar on Italian and American Directions*, edited by Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti. Routledge, 1988. pp. 151-165.

Nazzaro, Pellegrino. "The Mezzogiorno and The *Questione Meridionale* in Italian Historiography." *Italian Americans: Bridges to Italy, Bonds to America*, edited by Luciano J. Iorizzo and Ernest E. Rossi. Teneo, 2010. pp. 233-267.

Guglielmo, Jennifer. *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945*. University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Guglielmo, Thomas. *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945*. Routledge, 2003.

Handlin, Oscar. *The Uprooted*. Little Brown, 1979.

Laurino, Maria. *The Italian Americans: A History*. Norton, 2015.

Mangione, Jerre, and Ben Morreale. *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. Harper Perennial, 1992.

Muscio, Giuliana. "Introduction." *Napoli/New York/Hollywood: Film between Italy and the United States*. Fordham University Press, 2018. pp. 1-20.

Park, Robert E. "Human Migration and the Marginal Man." *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 33, no. 6, 1928, pp. 881-893.

Paternostro, Rocco. "Motivi storici, politici, economici e social dell'emigrazione italiana." *Letteratura italiana dell'emigrazione, con antologia dei testi*, edited by Rocco Paternostro. Aracne, 2011. pp. 13-59.

Perlmann, Joel. "Views of European Races among the Research Staff of the US Immigration Commission and the Census Bureau, ca. 1910." *Levy Economics Institute Working Paper Collection* 648, 2011, 1-32.

Petit, Jeanne D. *The Men and Women We Want: Gender, Race, and the Progressive Era Literacy Test Debate*. University of Rochester Press, 2010.

Sassen, Saskia. *Guests and Aliens*. The New Press, 1999.

--. "Urban Capabilities: An Essay on Our Challenges and Differences." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2012, 85-95.

Scalia, Rossella. "Elvira Notari: A Woman in Search of Desire." *Film International*, 2013, <http://filmint.nu/?p=9490>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2019.



Shiel, Mark. "Neorealism and the City." *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, edited by Mark Shiel. Columbia University Press, 2006. pp. 63–80.

Tamburri, Anthony J. *To Hyphenate or Not To Hyphenate? The Italian/American Writer: An Other American*. Guernica, 1991.

Tomadjoglou, Kim. "Elvira Notari." *Women Film Pioneers Project*, edited by Jane Gaines, et al. Center for Digital Research and Scholarship. Columbia University Libraries, 2013, <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-elvira-notari>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2019.

Verga, Giovanni, translated by Cecchetti, Giovanni. *The She-Wolf and Other Stories*. University of California Press, 1973.

Eva Pelayo Sañudo has a PhD in Gender and Diversity from the University of Oviedo, Spain. Her fields of research are Italian American literature, gender, diaspora, and urban and postcolonial studies. She completed her PhD in July 2017, with a thesis entitled *Genre, Gender and Space: Family Sagas and Streets in the Italian/American Experience*, for which she received the 2017 Prize of the Italian American Studies Association: the 'IASA Memorial Fellowship Distinction of Outstanding PhD Dissertation.' She has conducted research at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College, NY), the University of Calabria (Italy) and Stony Brook University (NY), and participated in international conferences in the USA, Italy and Slovakia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2786-5437>

eva.pelayo@unican.es