

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Defying expectations: gender and the 'Ndrangheta in Francesco Costabile's *Una femmina* (2022)

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Abstract

Francesco Costabile's *Una femmina* (2022) challenges traditional notions of masculinity and femininity embedded in the 'Ndrangheta and patriarchy at large. This analysis examines the construction of some of the key characters in *Una femmina* while reflecting on motherhood and female agency – two central topics in sociological research on gender and organised crime. The essay considers the power dynamics underlying these themes and explores the film's aesthetic choices, which express a gynocentric perspective through a psychological exploration of its central female characters.

Keywords: 'Ndrangheta; women; motherhood; cinema; mafia; agency

Cinematic portrayals of the Italian mafias have often highlighted the hyper-patriarchal context of these organisations, where extreme male dominance intensifies the inflexibility of gender roles and traditional societal expectations associated with them. Offering a different perspective, Francesco Costabile's *Una femmina* (2022) challenges conventional notions of masculinity and femininity, while encouraging a reflection on gender within the 'ndrina, the family/clan that is at the core of the 'Ndrangheta (the Calabrian mafia). This reflection goes beyond organised crime, which serves primarily as a context for the film's narrative. In the words of Costabile:

With family at its core, *Una femmina*'s main conflict acquires universality. Family is a very rigid social structure, which can become a psychological and emotional prison. This is true for anyone. Gender-based violence often occurs within the domestic sphere, and its victims struggle to report it because their perpetrators are within their own family. It is precisely this psychological and emotional bond that somehow unites this story with many others which are universal.¹

This article examines how some of *Una femmina*'s characters deviate from gender-based behavioural expectations, while delving into the themes of motherhood and female agency – two prevalent subjects in sociological research on gender and organised crime.² It also discusses the film's aesthetic choices that convey a gynocentric perspective through its psychological exploration of the feminine.

While acknowledging the universal relevance of the film's central conflict, this cinematic analysis takes into account some defining features of the criminal context in which the story unfolds. First and foremost is the fact that the *'Ndrangheta* is a mafia-type organisation structured around kinship; familial ties are therefore central to the organisation and provide it with stability. Consequently, the process of collaborating with justice carries an additional psychological burden for a member of the *'Ndrangheta*, as betrayal of the organisation also means betraying one's own family. Additionally, '[l]inks between *'ndrine* are generally reinforced by endogamic practices, marriages being a way of sealing alliances, resolving conflicts and avoiding vendettas. The *'Ndrangheta* organizational model thus replicates that of patriarchal societies in which the family remains the primary unit' (Kahn and Véron 2017, 82). Like in other mafias, women are instrumental to the Calabrian mafia: beyond procreating, they are also responsible for instilling the organisation's code of conduct to their children. As mothers tasked with raising the next generation of mafiosi, they perpetuate the power asymmetry inherent in this highly gendered milieu. Furthermore, women play a role in blood feuds, often by urging male family members to seek revenge, thus 'carrying out the pedagogy of the vendetta' (Siebert 1996, 40). It is also worth noting that, in the mafias, pressures regarding gender expectations extend to men as well. Renate Siebert observes that '[t]he man is compelled to show proof of his masculinity over and over again: it can never be regarded as secure' (1996, 23), as mafiosi must suppress all feminine traits and conform strictly to ideals of manliness. These are some aspects of the film's Calabrian mafia backdrop on which this article draws to support its interpretation.

Freely inspired by Lirio Abbate's book *Fimmine ribelli* (2013), *Una femmina* tells the story of Rosa (played by Lina Siciliano), a young woman who grows up in contemporary Calabria in her *'Ndrangheta* family. This gripping drama revolves initially around Rosa's discovery of the truth behind the death of her mother, Cetta, who was murdered for betraying her family/clan as an informant. The story later centres on Rosa's pursuit of vengeance, once she discovers that her own grandmother, Berta, and her uncle, Salvatore, are responsible for her mother's murder. As part of her revenge, Rosa orchestrates an assault on her family's property, pretends to have been raped, and kills her uncle Salvatore, leading her family to believe that a rival clan (headed by Ciccio) is responsible. Consequently, her calculated actions reignite a longstanding feud between the two opposing factions. To put an end to the conflict, Berta leverages Rosa as a bargaining chip when Ciccio asks for her hand. After running away with her beloved Gianni, who is murdered by Ciccio's hitmen, Rosa is forcefully brought to Ciccio, who offers her power on the condition that she submits to him. The film's conclusion leaves us with a pregnant Rosa, who, like her mother, decides to break free from the clutches of the Calabrian mafia by seeking the protection of the state. This decision is based on her desire to give her yet-to-be-born daughter a better life away from the *'Ndrangheta*'s violent legacy.

Motherhood between victimisation and agency

Una femmina explores the intricate nature of motherhood in the Calabrian mafia by shifting away from a simplistic view of women in mafia families as victims without agency. Such a perception has benefited the mafias by rendering women's contributions invisible. As Angela Iantosca observes: 'The common belief in the inferiority of women appears to have distracted even those in charge of investigations from observing their behaviours, their movements' (2013, 14). Concurrently, physical violence within crime has often been associated with and perceived as a manifestation of masculinity rather than femininity, so when confronted with instances of illegal behaviour by women there has been a tendency to regard female violence as an anomaly and an aberration.³

The beginning of *Una femmina* serves as a flashback, setting the stage for the entire story. While no precise temporal markers are provided, the screenplay indicates that the initial events take place in 2005, when Rosa is six years old, and that the rest of the story unfolds when she is 20 (Abate et al. 2021). The opening sequence shows the murder of Rosa's mother at the hands of Salvatore in collaboration with another man and with Berta's complicity. Through this sequence, which the viewer is later positioned to interpret as adult Rosa's dream, the film also provides some crucial information for the story's criminal context. Cetta is killed because she collaborated with the state. As an *infame* (a derogatory term used by mafiosi to refer to someone who betrays the organisation), she poses a threat and is a source of dishonour for her family. The name of this character and her death caused by the coerced ingestion of muriatic acid bear a resemblance to the story of Maria Concetta Cacciola.⁴ Like the fictional Cetta, Cacciola fled from her 'Ndrangheta family to seek the protection of state authorities. Soon afterwards, her parents convinced her to return home, leveraging her love for her children. Her death (in 2011) – portrayed as a suicide by her family – was caused by the ingestion of muriatic acid. Cacciola is one of the many courageous *fimmine ribelli* at the centre of the book by Abbate, who co-wrote *Una femmina*'s storyline with Edoardo De Angelis and contributed to its screenplay (along with Costabile, Serena Brugnolo and Adriano Chiarelli). Hers is not the only story that comes to mind when watching this film. *Una femmina* conjures up many other real-life accounts of women who took on the Calabrian mafia (Giuseppina Pesce, Lea Garofalo, Denise Cosco and Santa 'Tita' Buccafusca, to name just a few) and rebelled against its tyrannical and misogynistic system. As in *Una femmina* and in Abbate's book, their stories encompass instances of domestic violence, femicides to protect the family 'honour', and forced marriages to forge alliances and consolidate the power of the clan.

The significance of these stories is apparent from the film's opening caption: 'Questo film è ispirato a storie e fatti realmente accaduti' (This film is inspired by real stories and events). This is followed by a dedication: 'A tutte le donne vittime della 'Ndrangheta. A tutte le femmine ribelli' (To all the women victims of the 'Ndrangheta. To all rebel women). The concurrent use of 'women victims' and 'rebel' introduces a gendered focus from the very start of the film: on the one hand, the victimisation of women within the mafia context; on the other, their ability to revolt. Furthermore, the term '*femmine*' ('*fimmine*' in the regional linguistic variety often spoken in the film) can carry a derogatory and sexualised connotation in Italian. However, Costabile reclaims the term to signify empowerment and liberation from patriarchy. Similarly to 'queer', '*femmina*' is here reappropriated to subvert traditional perceptions of femininity as nurturing and maternal.⁵

While the concepts of victim and rebel suggest antithetical behavioural patterns, *Una femmina* highlights their simultaneous existence, distancing itself from gender biases that deprive women of their agency. Rather than relying on simplistic hero-versus-villain dynamics, Costabile presents a nuanced portrayal of his female protagonists. Rosa, the film's hero, challenges her family/clan, while Berta, positioned as the antagonist, remains loyal to it and takes on a role of perpetrator. However, she is also depicted as a complex and tormented individual, adding layers to her character. As a mafia woman, she has what Ombretta Ingrassi calls 'conformist agency':

instilling in children the fundamentals of the mafia ideology, including vendetta, honour and the law of silence. Female participation in this training is quite evident when the basic nucleus of the organisation and the blood family overlap: always in the 'Ndrangheta and most of the time in Cosa Nostra. (Ingrassi 2021, 63)

The film's opening scene centres on Berta's words and emotions during a phone call with her daughter Cetta, who is absent from the scene, as is her voice from the other end of the

call. By choosing not to include Cetta's voice, Costabile underscores the film's focus on what remains unsaid and unseen. As he puts it:

[W]hat's between the frames, what's invisible, the unspoken word and phrase are very important to me. Silence plays a fundamental role. The off-screen is linguistically important because we need the viewer to be in an active position, to be involved and to immerse themselves in the film. The spectator can thus try to understand what's beyond the images to emotionally connect with the film and be moved by it.⁶

The blurred photography employed in this initial segment adds to the overall intended sense of incompleteness that this part of *Una femmina* conveys. The resulting effect is simultaneously estranging and compelling, and engages the viewer's interpretive capacity. As Paola Casella (2022) observes, the initial scenes 'visually portray a world that is at least half unknowable'. On the one hand, Berta's one-sided 'conversation' suggests that her daughter Cetta is collaborating with law enforcement, without ever explicitly addressing these circumstances or making any direct reference to the 'Ndrangheta.⁷ On the other, it is only after the first ten minutes of the film that the spectator is provided with a reason for the partially blurred images. Following an extreme close-up of Cetta's lifeless face, in fact, the next scene shows adult Rosa awakening seemingly from a nightmare, which serves as an explanation for the opening's stylistic choices.

This initial dreamlike setting – like the subsequent scenes showing Cetta's return to her family and her murder – suggests Rosa's psychological effort to remember the traumatic circumstances of her mother's death. Her fragmented memories find their representation in the hazy images (with sepia-toned lighting implying the flashback), while the traumatic aspect is underscored by the non-diegetic eerie sound alternating with diegetic noises. Adding to the complexity of the film's beginning is that Rosa's initial dream also features Rosa as a child waking up while her mother is being killed. The viewer is left wondering how much of the murder she witnessed in reality; like Rosa, the audience must interpret the nightmare.

This oneiric sequence establishes the psychological tone that defines *Una femmina*. Berta's insistent close-ups problematise her complicity in the murder of her own daughter by conveying emotions and psychological conflicts. Although she draws Cetta into the wolf's den by leveraging her maternal love for Rosa, her suffering is apparent. While in the opening scene her emotions are less discernible due to the lack of a frontal view of her face, this moment also hints at the ambiguity of her feelings. This filming style suggests that she is withholding information when speaking to Cetta: she knows that, once back, her daughter will be murdered. When an out-of-focus Salvatore enters the scene, the sudden change in Berta's tone of voice from begging to threatening highlights her internal struggle.

The opening sequence not only contextualises the conflict that initiates the story but also draws attention to one of the central issues of the film: the complexity of motherhood in the 'Ndrangheta. *Una femmina* suggests that Berta is both a victim and a perpetrator. As she will explain to Rosa later in the film, 'senza omini come a chisti, noi non siamo nenti' (without men like these, we are nothing), thus highlighting the subjugation and dependency of women on men, which she sees as inevitable. However, while recognising the brutality of the environment she is part of ('noi bestie siamo ... bestie sbandate, senza rispetto' [we are beasts ... we're stray, disrespectful beasts]), she also upholds and imposes her internalised mafia codes and roles on Cetta and Rosa.

Una femmina encourages a reflection on the free will of mafia women, and in particular mothers. Does their victimisation exclude agency? The portrayal of Berta in *Una femmina* is in line with 'the ambivalence toward male domination' that Siebert sees as a source of

female violent behaviour towards other women in mafia contexts (2007, 42). This film also refutes the stereotypes about mafia women being powerless and unaware of their male relatives' illegal deeds – clichés that historically have influenced law enforcement's perception of women. In this regard, Ingrascì talks about the 'judiciary paternalism' that – 'conditioned by sociocultural prejudices' – has led to the impunity of mafia women and the perception of their lack of agency (2007, 105–107).

After Salvatore's death, Berta's authority within the family becomes evident. While *Una femmina* includes the mafia movie's trope of the distraught mother crying for her murdered mafioso son, Berta's matriarchal authority is what the film foregrounds once she assumes the responsibility of family leader. Contrary to what one could expect from a mafia setting, she does not pass the baton to her grandson Natale, since he is unable to exercise emotional control and lacks the requisite masculinity of a mafioso. Natale's characterisation, which I cannot discuss here in detail for lack of space, challenges the dichotomy between male superiority and female inferiority.

After the murder of Salvatore, two scenes contrast how the Romeo family members react psychologically to the loss of their patriarch. In the scene of the funeral, through insistent close-ups the camera highlights Rosa's restraint versus the emotional reaction of her family members. Although her behaviour might be expected by the viewer, who, unlike Rosa's family, knows that she is Salvatore's killer, the film takes this opportunity once again to challenge gender expectations. This becomes even more apparent as the scene concludes with Rosa offering solace to Natale by allowing him to rest his head on her shoulder. A subsequent scene shows the Romeos sitting in their dining room, with Natale at the head of the table in the seat which once belonged to his father. Shots of the family gathered at the dining table are recurrent in this film and function as a reminder of the familial structure of the 'Ndrangheta, an organisation based on blood ties. They also draw attention to the asymmetrical power distribution between genders, with the patriarch sitting at the head of the table and filmed from behind, thus emphasising his perceptual subjectivity. However, in this scene, Natale's presumed authority as the only male family member is contested by Berta, who, as Salvatore's mother, asserts her role to orchestrate revenge: 'Ricordati che tuo padre è figlio mio e ora sono io che decido come e quando' (Remember that your father was my son. I have to decide how and when).

When Berta later takes control of her family and uses Rosa as a bargaining chip to re-establish order and put an end to the feud with rival boss Ciccio, her choices foreground her dual condition of victim and offender. In the latter part of the film, a specific scene underscores this complex situation by showcasing Berta's emotional reaction to Rosa accusing her of being responsible for Cetta's murder. This coincides with Rosa's revelation of her pregnancy and the sex of the baby, '*una fimmina*'. Given her defiant tone of voice and the allusion to the film's title, the significance of this information within Rosa's journey to empowerment becomes apparent. Like in Fernando Muraca's *La terra dei santi* (2015), a film that also centres on women within the Calabrian mafia, here Costabile encourages a reflection on the implications of being born a girl within the 'Ndrangheta's violent and misogynistic milieu. In this scene, Berta's body language and vocalisations serve as a poignant reminder of her own daughter's violent death due to the forced ingestion of muriatic acid. The emotional intensity of this moment of the film magnifies Berta's anguish more than in previous scenes. The interplay of low- and high-angle shots, along with Rosa's imposing presence as she holds Berta's head in a position reminiscent of Cetta's murder scene, elicits some empathy towards Rosa's grandmother.

It is worth noting that *Una femmina* introduces two contrasting perspectives on mothers in the criminal organisation from the outset: the nurturing aspect represented by Cetta's love for young Rosa and the institutional role of motherhood within the 'Ndrangheta that leads Berta to sacrifice her own daughter.⁸ Through Berta's nuanced character, Costabile

challenges a perception of mothers – and women in general – in the Italian mafias as passive victims without agency. Berta's complexity thus defies a simplistic interpretation of womanhood, as does the portrayal of Rosa's character, as I discuss in the next section.

Female agency through vendetta

The theme of maternity introduced at the beginning of *Una femmina* resonates in the film's conclusion, when Rosa, who is pregnant, decides to co-operate with the state to provide a better life for her soon-to-be-born daughter. The desire to protect her child leads Rosa to make the same choice as her mother's and betray the 'Ndrangheta. However, maternity serves primarily as a backdrop to the film's core: Rosa's rebellion. By showcasing this latter theme within the narrative, the film challenges the traditional binary perspective that portrays men as rational, strong and aggressive, while depicting women as emotional, weak and forgiving. Costabile's film thus defies expectations based on stereotypes and empowers Rosa, rather than confining her to the cliché role of the passive victim of violence. Through Rosa's character, the film departs from the normalised dichotomy of dominant masculinity and submissive femininity, and subverts gender expectations concurrently on two fronts: in the way she is portrayed and in the context of gender dynamics within the 'Ndrangheta.

Once Rosa manages to reconstruct the traumatic memories of her mother's murder, she adopts tactics of rebellion that conjure conventionally masculine conduct rather than behavioural patterns traditionally seen as feminine traits. Therefore, she does not comply with the hegemonic ideology of gender that would expect her to act as a 'woman' under male dominance. She also deviates from the patterns found in several of the stories in Abbate's *Fimmine ribelli*, where women attempt to leave their 'Ndrangheta families without resorting to violence themselves. Unlike these real-life accounts, Rosa takes matters into her own hands by killing her uncle, assuming a role typically associated with men in both mafia movies and the real context of the 'Ndrangheta.

However, Costabile avoids a polarised view by using a nuanced approach when representing Rosa's revenge. He inserts the killing of Salvatore between two scenes featuring Rosa's romance with Gianni, with whom she also runs away later in the film. Rosa's femininity portrayed in the context of a heterosexual love story is thus contrasted with the violent act of assassinating her uncle, which evokes masculinity from a gendered viewpoint. Later in the film, before Gianni is killed by Ciccio's hitmen, Costabile resorts to a similar juxtaposition with a prior romantic scene again featuring Gianni and Rosa.

Just as Cetta's murder is preceded by the lyrical moment of her reunion with Rosa as a child, the contrast with these sentimental scenarios intensifies the impact of the depicted violence. In the case of Salvatore's murder, the two love scenes that respectively precede and follow the homicide further highlight a subversion of gendered expectations. Both are characterised by the absence of dialogue, but they exhibit several differences. The initial scene displays a fragmented, mirrored reflection of the two lovers in bed (Figure 1). Rosa remains motionless, seemingly lost in thought, while Gianni embraces her. The scene defies the voyeuristic portrayal of women and heterosexual romance by abstaining from the sexualisation of Rosa. Her torso is fully covered (unlike Gianni's), and the reflection in the mirror shows her naked legs flipped and thus visually detached from the rest of her figure. The optical effect employed here diminishes this moment's eroticism by diverting attention away from Rosa's body and shifting the focus to her contemplative state, thus emphasising introspection over sensuality. The romantic moment that follows the murder includes several extreme close-ups centring primarily on the lovers' faces and hands. A relaxing non-diegetic tune accompanies Rosa and Gianni's romantic exchanges throughout the scene. No nudity is displayed, with the shots evoking affection and intimacy rather than eroticism. Rosa's abandonment in her lover's arms restores expectations of femininity (at times



Figure 1. Rosa and Gianni.

evoking the vulnerability of a young girl), which contrast with the scene where she kills her uncle.

Significantly, the murder takes place during Salvatore's hunting excursion, thus in a traditionally male context. The scene unfolds with a frontal camera stealthily observing Salvatore through the vegetation as if he were a target. He is unexpectedly shot in the leg by Gianni from behind. It is only later that Rosa seizes Gianni's rifle and successfully murders her uncle, accomplishing what her male companion has only partially achieved (and for which he was ridiculed by an injured Salvatore). The scene ends with an emotional Gianni hugging a much more composed Rosa. Rosa's fierce gaze here contrasts with Gianni's shaken appearance and creates a tension between their opposed reactions, thus defying once again gendered clichés. The scene underscores Rosa's central role in her vendetta, in contrast with Gianni's instrumental but secondary function.

Even before the uncle's assassination scene, Rosa adopts methods that challenge normative social and cinematic constructions of gender. For instance, she simulates being raped by inserting a hammer into her vagina and thus losing her virginity. The hammer, a tool conventionally associated with the male sphere, acquires here the phallic significance Linda Williams attributes to knives, axes or chains in horror films, when discussing the empowerment of the girl-victim against the monster-killer (1991, 7). If read symbolically, this violent act on Rosa's own body can signal her insubordination towards the patriarchal system that regulates women's sexuality and reproduction. Replacing a rape scene, this self-inflicted violation suggests Rosa's control over her body. As in other instances, the camera focuses on her face and lets the viewer imagine what the scene only implies, thus avoiding a sexualising and voyeuristic overall effect.

Moving away from what Emiliano Morreale identifies as the 'trope of rape' in mafia movies (2020, 57), *Una femmina* does not include rape scenes.⁹ It also does not show initiations of men to the organisation. That said, this is a violent initiation scene: it marks Rosa's loss of virginity and the beginning of her vengeance. Notably, her act of rebellion starts within the confines of her own home and is directed specifically at the Romeos' property (which would include Rosa's body). She releases their goats and sets fire to her own family's barn, while also damaging some concealed drug packages. Additionally, the act of taking her virginity becomes a strategic component of this vengeful tactic, serving as the ultimate sign of dishonour that will demand retribution against those presumed responsible.

Her actions to avenge her mother and counter her uncle's threats move her from her oppressive home to outdoor spaces, signalling empowerment and liberation from her family's control. Indoor environments in this film are often claustrophobic and sometimes

barely illuminated. The dark cinematography adds to the intensity of the characters' faces, which are frequently marked by shadows to highlight their emotions. These shadows contribute to creating a realistic effect that to a certain degree distorts the actors' features. The intensity of their facial expressions under dim lighting (sometimes just a couple of bulbs in the *mise-en-scène*) reflects the 'black souls' of certain characters – to borrow from Gioacchino Criaco's eponymous novel (2008), which served as an inspiration for Costabile's film. Through the dark photography, low-angle shots that create an imposing atmosphere and slow panning accompanied by an ominous non-diegetic tune, some of the exterior shots mirror the oppressive ambiance found within the indoor spaces. These locations, acting as a metaphor, represent the family that wields authority over Rosa while concealing the truth surrounding her mother's assassination as well as the drug-trafficking activities carried out by her male relatives and other clan members.¹⁰ Contrasting with the oppressive darkness and spatial restrictions of these scenes are shots of the mountains where Rosa flees with Gianni to escape from the forced marriage with Ciccio.¹¹

Rosa's defiant temperament remains steadfast even when her revenge backfires. She confronts Berta, who agrees to Ciccio's proposal to marry Rosa; she escapes with Gianni and maintains her unyielding spirit when forcibly brought to the boss, following Gianni's murder. However, in a scene where she is shown being groomed in preparation for an encounter with Ciccio, she appears deprived of agency, as she passively undergoes a beauty ritual attended by other women (who, in a normative feminine fashion, blow-dry her hair and give her a manicure). The scene emphasises her passivity, which signals conventional gendered submission. Immediately following this moment is the encounter with Ciccio in which he sets his rules: Rosa will have to accept his dominance and show obedience; in return, she will get his protection while benefiting from the power conferred on her as the boss's partner. In this scene, her red dress, red lipstick¹² and striking appearance convey a conventionally feminine – and even seductive – overtone, one that is imposed upon her and that sharply contrasts with her appearance up to this point in the film. Her commodified looks, coupled with her rebellious demeanour, visually complement Ciccio's perception of Rosa as a grown-up woman (no longer a girl, as he had described her earlier in the film), who, like *fimmine* who act 'like wild horses' and are 'beautiful' and 'powerful', he wants to tame and possess. The analogy between women and wild horses there to be tamed conveys a sexualised cliché within the male dominator/female subordinate dualism. Nevertheless, the scene ultimately subverts this binary opposition with a final close-up of Rosa's defiant gaze matching Ciccio's, signifying her empowerment rather than submission and conveying a sense of authority – one that evokes the outcome of a mafia initiation. Her alliance with Ciccio suggests that the true conflict in *Una femmina* is not between rival clans but within Rosa's family, reflecting a broader struggle between genders and generations.

This scene with Rosa and Ciccio does not include graphic violence that would emphasise her capitulation to male dominance. Morreale observes that themes like rape, gender-based violence and women in danger are common in mafia movies (2020, 52), as women are often positioned as spectacles to satisfy the voyeuristic male gaze.¹³ *Una femmina*, however, departs from this model. In this scene, while the presence of a chain hanging from the ceiling over a table suggests the potential for cruelty and domination (Figure 2) and hints at the possibility of sadistic undertones, the lack of brutality and nudity does not encourage sadomasochistic fantasies in the audience. When discussing melodramas, horror films and pornography, Williams talks about 'body genres' and 'the pertinent features of bodily excess' they share. She explains that 'in each of these genres the bodies of women figured on screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain' (1991, 4, emphasis in the original). Unlike those three genres, *Una femmina* departs from stereotypical representations of such emotions through the exploitation of the female body for the gratification of the male gaze and downplays Rosa's victimisation (a choice sealed by her fierce stare at the end of the scene).



Figure 2. Rosa and Ciccio.

Rosa's commanding portrayal takes centre stage in the final segment of *Una femmina*, as she returns to her home town dressed up and wearing makeup (a change of style that highlights her new role as the boss's partner), confronts her grandmother (as we have previously discussed), and joins the Holy Saturday procession for Easter – a scene where her empowerment becomes collective. Arguably *Una femmina*'s most theatrical moment, this is also among the loudest, with many black-veiled women singing the 'Inno alla Desolata'. Traditionally recited by more than 300 women in the popular procession in Canosa, Puglia, the hymn to the Holy Virgin Desolate is based on the *Stabat Mater*, attributed to Iacopone da Todi (thirteenth century).¹⁴ The whole scene could be seen as a rebellious response to Ciccio's demand for '*silenzio*' and no more '*tragedie*' (dramas) in the previous encounter with Rosa. In the context of *Una femmina*, these two terms foreshadow Rosa co-operation with the law. In the last scene, in fact, she is seen running towards a police car, where a female officer and a male officer are awaiting her. She breaches the code of silence (mentioned in the movie's English title, *Una Femmina: The Code of Silence*, but not in the Italian original) like her mother at the beginning of the film and becomes what the mafiosi would call contemptuously a '*tragediatore*' (or rather a '*tragediatrice*' to mark her gender) – literally, someone who makes up dramas, or an informant. However, outside the specific mafia domain, *silenzio* and *tragedie* recall respectively the silence so often imposed on women by male dominance and the dramas with which women's reactions are often misogynistically labelled. Interestingly, Costabile's film only hints at Rosa's collaboration with justice, which occupies a marginal space within *Una femmina*'s narrative. Captured in slow motion and underscored by an emotional but reassuring musical theme, this moment evokes a previous oneiric scene, where Rosa dreams of her mother leaving with the police or the carabinieri. Presented as part of a nightmare, this earlier scene showcases close-ups of Rosa's deceased uncle Salvatore and her grandmother Berta. A series of high-angle shots of Berta's face are a haunting reminder of Cetta's murder with muriatic acid. Additionally, this moment foreshadows Berta's later encounter with Rosa towards the film's conclusion, when she is filmed with a similar expression. Located just before Rosa's escape with Gianni in the attempt to avoid marrying Ciccio, this dream functions as a hint for the viewer to Rosa's decision to turn evidence at the end of the film. So, even though her collaboration with the authorities is not foregrounded in *Una femmina*, Costabile does not merely relegate it to the ending but hints at the possibility three-quarters into the film. When asked why he chose to give Rosa's revengeful actions more prominence compared to her decision to seek witness protection and embrace legality (which is, in contrast, highlighted in several stories from Abbate's *Fimmine ribelli*), Costabile explains:



Figure 3. Rosa in the Easter procession.

I wanted to leave the state as a last resort, in part because in those places, in those towns, the state is somewhat absent. The feeling is that there are other rules governing the territory. It's almost like going back in time, to a reality with ancestral codes. But it is also true that the state is present, and there is a way out. And it is true that judges, the police and carabinieri are working to combat the *'Ndrangheta*, and that there have been many women who have decided to collaborate. Perhaps the first real crack in the power of the *'Ndrangheta* has come precisely through women. When women themselves rebel, even the most powerful families implode.¹⁵

References to the concept of *omertà* (the code of silence) are recurrent in the film: Rosa realises her mother was killed for having 'talked' with the authorities, and is warned more than once not to follow suit. *Una femmina* distances itself from depicting *omertà* as silence driven by loyalty founded on shared mafia values and traceable to cultural traits. Instead, the film suggests that this silence arises from the fear of punishment and retaliation, fear that both Rosa and her mother decide to face.¹⁶ However, what the film emphasises even more than the idea of breaking silence is Rosa's gaze.¹⁷ The camera's insistence on her eyes foregrounds her subjectivity, as well as her desire to see what is concealed from her (the truth behind her mother's death, for example). On multiple occasions in the film, she is denied the right to look, she is questioned about what she stares at, or she is forced to look when she does not want to. Her gaze is a form of rebellion. To borrow from bell hooks, while acknowledging the different context, 'Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency' (1992, 116).

During the procession, Rosa and the other veiled women walk together, their black veils symbolising mourning for Jesus's death and Mary's sorrow, while also representing their communal maternal pain. However, at the end of the scene they collectively take their veils off – a gesture that emphasises solidarity while also suggesting a desire to reclaim their subjectivity (their individual identities that were concealed by the veils). They remove their veils after Rosa does so, creating the effect of an unstoppable wave of rebellion that spreads from one courageous woman to another (Figure 3). Although the procession conjures motherhood as an idealised concept through the reference to the Virgin Mary, this scene's conclusion symbolically hints at the impact on other women of Rosa's rebellion and female empowerment as a mother-to-be.

Una femmina presents another depiction of women's solidarity in an earlier scene, where Rosa helps a black woman who appears to be a sex worker presumably injured by Natale.

At first, this scene creates an impression that the sex worker is dead (her head is surrounded by a large puddle of blood). However, when Rosa touches the woman, she suddenly awakens, conjuring up the idea of resurrection (which, differently from the Christological tradition, centres here on women). What follows is a pivotal moment in the film's narrative, as the encounter with the woman takes place in the same house where Cetta was killed and serves as a catalyst for Rosa to finally recall her mother's murder. In fact, her memories are reawakened later in the segment, paralleling the 'resurrection' of the seemingly lifeless black woman. Despite highlighting Rosa's solidarity with the black woman, this scene could have been an opportunity to disrupt cinematic representations of gender in relation to race. While Rosa is bestowed agency through her healing effect on the black female sex worker, the latter is portrayed as a passive victim, deprived of both a voice (she does not speak) and a distinct identity (she does not have a name). Consequently, by inserting the stereotype of the sexualised black woman into a segment that serves to drive the narrative forward, the film overlooks the complex relationship between gender and race, rather than acknowledging it. At the same time, by foregrounding a woman's experience of abuse and the obliteration of her identity, this scene foreshadows another instance in the film where Rosa finally finds out where her mother's grave is. As she stares at the abandoned gravestone, she remarks, 'Manco u nome c'hanno misso' (They didn't even write her name), thereby underscoring the annihilating impact of her violent family on her mother, even after death. Cetta is stripped of her identity as the ultimate punishment for the 'dishonour' she has brought to her relatives.

When it comes to gender assumptions, the scene with the sex worker effectively juxtaposes Natale and Rosa by simultaneously embracing and rejecting notions of masculinity and femininity. On the one hand, it implies Natale's aggressiveness without depicting it directly, focusing instead on his emotional response to the consequences of his violent actions. On the other, it combines Rosa's caregiving skills (traditionally perceived and portrayed as a feminine trait) with her composure and authority, as she instructs Natale to leave the room when the black woman becomes frightened upon seeing him.

Conclusions

When discussing the social effect of his book *Fimmine ribelli* and Costabile's film, Abbate points to the positive impact that both works can have on women:

Writing, and even more so the big screen, have the power to give courage to all these women, not only in Calabria but in every region and city. After the publication of the book, other girls found the courage to rebel, distance themselves, have their own lives, say no, and report ... If a story reaches the big screen with the authorial strength that Francesco Costabile has been able to give following the paths indicated by Edoardo [De Angelis], it becomes a very powerful weapon in defence of those women who are still victims or oppressed today. (Abbate and De Angelis 2022)

Costabile's film effectively reflects on gender construction in cinema by bringing to the fore women in the male-dominated world of the *Ndrangheta*. It explores womanhood in relation to masculinity, subverting gender expectations within a violent and hypermasculine environment. By adopting a feminist perspective, *Una femmina* highlights both female agency and its severe limitations in this oppressive context. The film challenges idealised notions of maternity and family, exposing their ties to violence within the Calabrian mafia, and contributes to a broader discussion on gender dynamics inside and outside criminal contexts.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. Interview with Francesco Costabile, 8 December 2022. Translations from Italian are mine, unless indicated. It is worth noting that the theme of family and the exploration of its internal struggles are also at the core of Costabile's more recent film *Familia* (2024).
2. Pioneering studies on women and the mafias emerged in the 1990s with Puglisi (1990) and Siebert ([1994] 1996), followed by Dino and Principato (1997), Ingrasci (2007) and Fiandaca ([2000] 2007), among others. 'Donne di Mafia', a 2011 special issue of *Meridiana: Rivista di Storia e Scienze Sociali*, also contributed to the discussion. Additionally, psychologists, cinema scholars and journalists have joined the discussion, with journalist Longrigg's books (1997, 2004) offering notable insights.
3. When discussing the roles of women in the Italian mafias, Allum and Marchi note that 'qualitative observations of women's involvement have been considered biased because it is believed that these observations are subjective and often influenced by widespread traditional prejudices about women and their "good nature"' (2007, 361).
4. In the opening phone call, Berta's words to her daughter closely mirror those wiretapped from Maria Concetta's mother. Excerpts from this wiretapped conversation are found in 'Ndrangheta, caso Cacciola' (2014). The film's screenplay further highlights parallels between Cetta and Maria Concetta Cacciola, including a scene where the family lawyer tapes Cetta retracting her testimony, just as Cacciola did in real life.
5. Interview with Francesco Costabile, 8 December 2022.
6. Interview with Francesco Costabile, 8 December 2022.
7. Some remarks about a lawyer and the opposition between 'us' – the family/clan – and 'them' – the state – suffice. Apart from the opening inscription, the word 'Ndrangheta' is never mentioned in the film, and minimal space is given to references to the organisation's criminal activities.
8. A third portrayal of maternity in the film is that offered by Rita, Natale's mother. Rita is a caring mother who is subjugated by her family/clan and aware of their criminal activities. Unlike Berta, she is portrayed as being sympathetic to Rosa.
9. However, earlier in the film, while Natale and Rosa are playing together, he holds her down on the floor and touches her inappropriately. Rosa immediately reacts by freeing herself and warning him not to do it again.
10. The film foregrounds Rosa's exclusion from these activities due to her gender, a common theme in films featuring organised crime.
11. Although referencing the Aspromonte range, *Una femmina* was filmed in the Pollino mountains, north of Calabria, and in the small town of Verbicaro.
12. Earlier in the film, lipstick – a symbol of femininity – represents both Berta's exploitation of Rosa and Rosa's rebellion. When Berta orders Rosa to clean up before meeting Ciccio, Rosa applies a lipstick but then defiantly wipes it off, glaring at her grandmother in disdain. In contrast, in *La siciliana ribelle* (Amenta 2008), red lipstick symbolises the protagonist Rita Mancuso's emancipation and rebellion (see Vitti 2012 for an interpretation of colours and objects in Amenta's film). Inspired by Rita Atria's fight against the Sicilian Mafia, Amenta's film highlights her resistance before her tragic death following the murder of Judge Paolo Borsellino.
13. See also Dana Renga's compelling reflection on rape portrayed in film, when discussing Pasquale Scimeca's *Placido Rizzotto* (2000) in *Unfinished Business* (2013, 36–50).
14. In the film, we hear the opening lines of the *Inno alla Desolata* ('Mary was grieving breathless and voiceless'). As the women sing, a high-angle shot shows Berta staring at the ceiling, vocalising her pain, symbolising both her role in her daughter's murder and her sorrow as a mother. Like her daughter, she is now 'breathless and voiceless'. This same procession also appears in Mezzapesa's *Ti mangio il cuore* (2022), based on the story of Rosa Di Fiore, the first woman from the Gargano mafia to collaborate with justice.
15. Interview with Francesco Costabile, 8 December 2022.
16. For a discussion of various interpretations given to *omertà* in the context of the Italian mafias, see Sales (2015, 233–272).
17. A similar emphasis on the female gaze in relation to the desire for truth is also present in Carpignano's *A Chiara* (2021), a film that centres on a female protagonist and places family within the context of the 'Ndrangheta at its core.

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Italian summary

Una femmina (2022) del regista Francesco Costabile mette in discussione nozioni tradizionali di mascolinità e femminilità radicate nella 'ndrangheta e, più in generale, nel patriarcato. Questa analisi esamina la costruzione di alcuni dei personaggi principali del film, soffermandosi sulla maternità e sull'agency femminile – due temi centrali nell'ambito degli studi sociologici su genere e criminalità organizzata. Il saggio riflette sulle dinamiche di potere relazionate con questi temi ed esplora le scelte estetiche del film, che esprimono una prospettiva incentrata sul femminile attraverso un'indagine psicologica delle protagoniste.

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