

A Man Does What a Man Must Do: Social Identity in Neapolitan *Sceneggiata*

Introduction

The 1916 production of *Pupatella* at Teatro Orfeo in Naples, based on a song with the same name by poet Libero Bovio, marked the beginning of a theatrical genre. The intention of the theater company Maggio-Coruzzolo-Ciaramella was to avoid paying the 2% tax on musical comedies and variety shows that the Italian government had introduced a year before. However, the unprecedented idea of scripting dialogues and creating a loose plot around the performance of a popular song proved to be very successful. *Sceneggiata*, as the genre came to be called from the word *sceneggiare* (to script), soon turned into a canon and a favorite of sub-proletarian spectators in many Southern Italian cities. The genre went through three main stages of development. The first shows were mostly an assemblage of songs with very loose cohesive connections with a common storyline. Love, either betrayed, lost, or found, constituted the main topic of this era. The second phase saw the codification of the style by the theatre company Cafiero-Fumo and started with *Core signore* (1920) the first play in which a husband (*isso*) who discovers the unfaithful love between his wife (*essa*) and another man (*'o malamente*) seeks revenge by killing her. This dramatic resolution became the cliché of most scripts, with women often succumbing to the law of honor that men must abide to in order to be real man. After World War II *sceneggiata* declined and was met with reduced commercial success, only to live a short comeback in movie adaptations in the 1970s and early 1980s, starring famous Neapolitan singers such as Mario Merola and Nino D'Angelo (Fofi 23-25).

Similar to other theatrical canons and popular entertainment, the commercial success of the *sceneggiata* was due to its condensed vision of the world in few repetitive and identifiable elements, which spectators could easily recognize and associate with. Its fixed stylistic and thematic pillars did not change until the 1960s: a combination of music and spoken drama; the use of a famous song as the main expedient in the plot's construction; a love/betrayal triangle among the three protagonists (usually a married couple and a male lover) ending with the punishment of the cheating wife and, more rarely, of the unfaithful man; a highly melodramatic acting and singing technique; a set design

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

representing an outdoor area, a portion of *vicolo* (small alley in the city center of Naples) or a square. *Sceneggiata* normally followed a three-act structure. Act one provided an introduction to the show, giving the background of the characters, their social status and the main plot tangle, and it also introduced the title song. Act two had a comic tone and served as a break between the dramatic conflict of the first act and the tragic ending of the third. Act three was generally much shorter, reintroducing the main problem and culminating in the tragic finale and full performance of the title song (Curi 687). Each act contained three to five songs, but the main singer always performed the full title in the finale as the climatic point of the tragedy.

I believe that the analysis of *sceneggiata* can unveil the links between the production of meaning and the representation of cultural values in a complex spatial context such as the low-income neighborhoods in Naples's city center. Long overlooked by critics and scholars for being mere entertainment for the masses without artistic merit, the initial interest around *sceneggiata* as a valuable cultural product arose in Naples in 1976 at a round table organized at *Festa dell'Unità* (the Communist Party annual fair) which brought together performers, journalists and critics. Undoubtedly, the work of Umberto Eco, and particularly the publication of *Apocalittici e integrati*¹ in 1964, greatly contributed to push Italian academics towards a serious study of mass-culture products in order to unveil their structural elements and analyze how they are consumed by people, once and for all dismantling the ivory tower of pure intellectualism. Moreover, I believe that the local culture of *sceneggiata* enters in dialogue with other melodramatic narratives of the early twentieth century and contributes to defining socio-aesthetic factors representative of a larger national framework in which issues of social identity and gender biases greatly affected how Italians were able to navigate the construction of their collective self in the decades that separate the unification of the country (1861) from the end of fascism (1945).

Before dwelling on the specific analysis of *sceneggiata*, I think it will be useful to acknowledge the ways in which it overlaps with and differs from the more generic genre of melodrama. Film studies scholars agree upon certain elements of melodrama, namely the fact that it described a traditional world in crisis struggling with modernity and patriarchal capitalism (Dyer), and that it arose from what Peter Brooks called the post-sacred era where imperative

values had vanished. Consequently, it represented a simplification of complexity in favor of easily identifiable moral values (Carlantonio), it evoked a certain nostalgia for a fictional golden age of the past (Morreale), and it performed a dramaturgy of non-representational signs showcasing stylized performances through voice and gestures (De Cordova).

To sum up the richness of this discussion, we must take into account how the public/private and male/female dualisms played within the dominant culture surrounding melodrama, and the ways in which gendered spaces were represented and used to narrate a story. Since Henri Lefebvre theorized that “space is both socially produced and socially productive and that the interplay between the two is crucial” (25), the theatre space of *sceneggiata* in continuity with the urbanistic unit of the *vicolo* build up a chronicle of Naples’s turn-of-the-century crisis as loss of political and economic centrality in the myth of the foundation of the nation. The critical tendency translated into a metaphor for a masculine unstable identity forced to reduce its recurrence to muscular strength and domination. The modern era, with its scientific, technological, and cultural revolutions caused a response in terms of vigilance and reclamation of the male position, while an increasingly feminist liberation movement was on the rise. The clash between these two polarizing trends was coterminous with *sceneggiata*, which, as I will discuss later, on the one side attempted to construct a static representation of Naples’s social and gender roles and, on the other, had to come to terms with change, embracing more cultural complexity than one could expect from entertainment. It is with an eye to this complexity, especially as *sceneggiata* interpreted it through the interpretation of masculinity and femininity, that I analyze the interplay between performance and sociology of the *vicolo*.

Using Richard Dyer’s classification of entertainment as “a type of performance produced for profit, performed before a generalized audience (the ‘public’), by a trained, paid group who do nothing else but produce performances which have the sole (conscious) aim of providing pleasure” (19), I inquire how *sceneggiata* fits into this definition. Undoubtedly made for profit, and written by professional authors and performers for a generalized audience of low-income workers, *sceneggiata* aimed at pleasure with a twist. In fact, *sceneggiata* did not offer escapism, at least not made explicit in the plot’s construction and depiction of characters.

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

What Dyer individuates as the “something better,” the alternatives and hopes that spectators could escape into, was missing in *sceneggiata*. The genre literally reproduced the *vicolo*’s sets and sceneries, the social and cultural dynamic of lack and deprivation of those same people who went to the theatre and of those same neighborhoods where the theatre venues were located. In other words, audiences went to theatre not to escape from their daily routine, but to see their own lives, struggles and hardships being represented on stage by famous actors and singers. Not the storyline, but the quality of the performance and the talent of the actors provided spectators with the escapist element of pleasure. First and foremost, the loyalty of spectators who truly enjoyed *sceneggiata* derived from the musical numbers that made use of songs commonly played by *posteggiatori* (informal music bands) in the streets of Naples, or that were famous because of recorded performances by singers such as Beniamino Gigli, Enrico Caruso, Elvira Donnarumma, and Armando Gill. Susanne Langer gives an exhaustive explanation of the synergy between music and emotions, worth quoting at length:

The tonal structures we call ‘music’ bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling—forms of growth and of attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm or subtle activation or dreamy lapses—not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of both—the greatness and brevity and eternal passing of everything vitally felt. Such is the pattern, or logical form, of sentience; and the pattern of music is that same form worked out in pure measures, sound and silence. Music is a tonal analogue of emotive life. Such formal analogy, or congruence of logical structures, is the prime requisite for the relation between a symbol and whatever it is to mean. The symbol and the object symbolized must have some common logical form. (27)

Neapolitan folk songs at the core of *sceneggiata* varied in their musical attributes, but for the most part, they were plaintive ballads in minor keys with an extremely fluid harmonic structure. This internal structure fit perfectly the melodramatic goal of *sceneggiata*, as musical minor keys worked in unison with the themes of tormented love, suffering, or longing for home. The

heightened feelings performed on stage caused the participatory response of the average spectator. From this viewpoint, *sceneggiata* perfectly suits Dyer's notion of entertainment, because it "does not simply 'give the people what they want' (since it actually defines those wants), so, as a relatively autonomous mode of cultural production, it does not simply reproduce unproblematically patriarchal-capitalist ideology" (20). The main melodramatic undertone of each *sceneggiata*, with the pleasing ploy of popular music and songs, aimed at solving the representation of crisis through the method of teaching-by-example. The performance of feelings was not individual, but always collective. Formulaic *sceneggiata* did not discuss singular stories but talked about the street rules of the *vicolo* that the shows adapted through musical numbers and a plethora of non-representational signs included in the mirroring effect between the reconstructed realism of the stage and the daily realism of the *vicolo*'s life. Oftentimes melodrama has been discussed in direct opposition with realism. However, the theatricality of Neapolitan street life brought the stage and the everyday a lot closer than one could expect. My reading of *sceneggiata* and *vicolo* as an interrelated duality, one impossible to exist without the other, aligns with the claim by Linda Williams that melodrama is not the "excessive or degraded other of realism" but that "realist cinematic effects—whether of setting, action, acting, or narrative motivation—most often operate in the service of melodramatic affects" (42).

How does a reading of gender play within the previous analysis? As Carla Marcantonio points out in her analysis of contemporary films "melodrama and melodramatic representations are most often associated with images of home—the family and the domestic sphere—one reason for which melodrama is still too often conflated with 'the woman's film'" (17). The cultural gendering of home, and feelings rendered explicit, constitute a forced construction of spaces as pertaining exclusively to women. They also implicitly refer to a certain nostalgia, not uncommon in melodramatic instances, for a time in which niches of people and their behaviors were allegedly clearer, based on hierarchical positions given by nature and a neat separation between male freedom and female subjugation. In the *vicolo*, concepts of social pressure and community cultural coercion molded the boundaries of gender roles. Masculinity and femininity in the *vicolo* were not individual choices but functioned as a public display of respect for

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

the behaviors that the *vicolo* itself acknowledged as masculine and feminine, which were not necessarily identical to men and women. In this sense, the *vicolo* always inhabited Eve Sedgwick's notion that "when something is about masculinity, it is not always 'about men'" (12). As such the *vicolo* was primarily a sociological category rather than a geographical place. In Naples's popular neighborhoods there never was one way to be a man. A man's actions depended more on the collective acceptance and defense of his reputation than on his free will. Likewise, there never was one way to be a woman, one that entailed the acceptance of family as the primary value of a woman's life, whether as a daughter to a father, a wife to a husband, or a mother to a son.

Sceneggiata introduced complexity and multiplicity in the seemingly reified and monolithic approach to the gender of the dominant culture. Here I refer to Jeff Hopkins's theorization that "the cinematic landscape is not . . . a neutral place of entertainment or an objective documentation or mirror of the 'real', but an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings of place and society are made, legitimized, contested, and obscured" (47). What Hopkins assumes for the cinematic landscape, aptly applies to melodrama and *sceneggiata* in so far as the reductionist representation of right and wrong hid a deeper anxiety about the complexity of the society underneath the representation. For instance, Naples's *vicolo*, albeit responding to a patriarchal power structure, was a safe space for the *femminiello*, a layered identity that cannot be reduced to a gay man. What mattered is that the *femminiello* was highly respected in the traditional *vicolo* as a shamanic figure on the threshold between sexes and between worlds, even when he would sell his body for a living. However, *sceneggiata* writers never included the *femminiello* among their recurring characters.² Likewise, when Doreen Massey says that representations identify ideologically charged spatial structures because "representation is not merely reflection; it is itself an active force in molding social relations and social understanding" (233), I deem that the fictional simplicity of *sceneggiata* restored a socio-dynamic of the *vicolo* that was far more articulate and problematic, and whose conflict specifically inhabited the way in which the protagonists' gender was framed in performance.

Sceneggiata complicated the over-simplified overlapping of home and feelings as a woman's thing in many ways. First and foremost, because it staged the action outside, a street or a square,

hence providing a public sphere traditionally inhabited by men. The *vicolo*, actually, was not reductively masculine; it was collective and therefore feminine as well. People in the *vicolo* lived publicly, exposing their bodies, family connections, and most intimate daily routines to the constant scrutinizing eye of the street. It was their behavior and ability to navigate the unwritten rules of the street to mark them as visible or invisible, notwithstanding their gender. As we will see, the *sceneggiata* acknowledged this fluid attitude by defining male and female characters through their actions, not their sexes. The street was also the common space where people could share highly charged experiences such as birth and death. It was not uncommon for people in the *vicolo* to fight, cheer, argue, laugh and cry together. That is why it would be unfit to simplify the reading of *sceneggiata*, its emotional narrations made of vocal and physical performances based on a full embracement of feelings, as feminine or effeminate. The home of *sceneggiata* was not a mere private nor female thing, but rather a combination of relations and events to be publicly displayed, shared and discussed. This communal life allowed men as well as women to showcase a full exhibition of emotions, from laughter to tears, including extreme rage, joy, and sorrow without necessarily being targeted as not masculine enough or not feminine enough. On the connection between emotional display of affection, other modes of explicit feelings, and masculinity, John Champagne writes:

The stereotype of the Italian male as effusive and volatile dates at least from the time of Stendhal. Minus an understanding of a culture of public spectacle whose history included carnival, religious processions, *commedia dell'arte*, and opera, he and his fellow travelers on the Grand Tour resorted to an essentializing vocabulary to diagnose the Italian character and its alleged excessive theatricality. Critics disagree, however, as to whether Stendhal's portrait is negative or positive. Arguing the latter, one writer suggests that according to Stendhal, the Italians go their own way, pursuing their passions and desires with brio, a spontaneous childlike intensity. Italians not only have strong feelings but express them freely. Italy is thus for Stendhal not the home of Machiavellianism or superficial extroversion, as is often assumed, but the 'native haunt of passion.' (2)

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

As Agustin Zarzosa says: “melodrama aims at redistributing the visibility of suffering in a community; however, to achieve this end, melodrama displays suffering as an effect of moral or social ideas” (9-10). This emphasizes the importance of the community in the *sceneggiata*'s use of public spaces as efficacious in marking all feelings as visible and legitimate. The representation of the gender dynamic of betrayal, revenge, honor and respect was not individual and did not pertain to the specific character who was going through his personal journey. The personal was always collective and public, because such is the level of the *vicolo*: a community that knows it all, sees it all, and interferes in it all. The *vicolo* is a breathing entity that places extreme pressure and burdens on its people, and excludes anyone else who is not from the *vicolo*. Whatever one does affects the continuity, survival, and efficacy of the *vicolo* itself. The Manichean separation of genders, useful in a theatrical representation, hid the existence of blurred lines in the social structure that originated the genre. Given that the shows spoke to an audience that was primarily comprised of the people living in the *vicolo*, I argue that the reduced and condensed narration on stage, aiming at the method of teaching-by-example, was met with a critical eye. Male spectatorship knew that the *vicolo*'s life was not exclusively run by men, and female spectatorship knew that not everything about them occurred in the privacy of the household.

The collective level of *sceneggiata* also links it to another fundamental characteristic of melodrama, one that is at the core of much scholarship. Melodrama, to quote Carla Marcantonio once more “arose as a means to represent and help make sense of emerging democratic and industrial societies” (2). This pairs up with the central idea of Peter Brooks that “[melodrama] comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, . . . melodrama becomes the principal mode for revealing a moral universe in the post-sacred era, a reason that it embodies a democratization of morality and its signs” (14-15). *Sceneggiata* filled the void left by the absence of imperatives with the *vicolo*'s internal rules and codes of behaviors. The inherent conservative nature of *sceneggiata* aimed to preserve the self-contained world of the *vicolo*, and, by doing this, it responded to the challenges posed to the *vicolo* itself and its inhabitants by the capitalistic transformations of Naples's belated industrialization, following the unification of Italy. After 1861,

Naples lost the centrality of its cultural and political wealth, crushed by the pushes for the country's unification and modernization. The people of the *vicolo* had a new, unknown enemy to face, the central bureaucratic government located in Rome, which in *sceneggiata* was often embodied by the police forces and the prison. This caused an anxiety, at the individual and collective level, that required a performative response able to use nostalgia to claim continuity with the past. Confronting drastic life conditions derived from capitalism, entertainment in the form of melodrama offered emotional responses able to recuperate a sense of community against displacement, hierarchy, new forms of labor, urbanistic transformations, and so on. How this applied to *sceneggiata* speaks directly to the idea that the melodramatic response was a victory over the repression of feelings, and hence a breakdown of the fictional separation between women's emotional response and men's rational reactions to the same events. *Sceneggiata* as entertainment proposed a world where emotional excess was the norm and "authentic" feelings were legible rather than veiled, bringing masculine and feminine forces in dialogical relations with each other based on interdependence and reciprocity.

Omme vs. omme 'e niente: Masculine Polarities

The Neapolitan dialect has only one word to define a man, *omme*, which is often expressed in the exhortation *fa l'omme!* ("be a man!"). Conversely, there are many expressions that Neapolitans use to describe a man who is not fit for the role, with varying degrees of insult: the most common *omme 'e niente* ("man worth nothing"), *guappo e' cartone* ("cardboard man"), *omme 'e quattro solde* ("man worth a few pennies"), *quaquaraguà* (an onomatopoeic sound for a chattering duck), and the rudest *omme 'e merda* ("shitty man"). Given that language represents the cultural structures of the society that produces it, we could conclude that in Naples there is only one correct way for being a man and many wrong ones. Right and wrong for whom? In the case of *sceneggiata*, it was the *vicolo*'s sedimented gender bias that informed the representation of masculinity on stage.

The authors and musicians³ who composed *sceneggiata* based its fundamental dramaturgical conflict on the culturally accepted distinction between *omme* (the male protagonist commonly known as *isso*, "he") and *omme 'e niente* (the male antagonist usually referred to as *'o malamente*, "the bad guy"). The characters'

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

polarized masculinities were built not in relation to each other, but through forms of desire and physical dominance acted upon the female co-protagonist (*essa*, “she”).⁴ I believe that the generic names *isso*, *essa*, and *’o malamente* are telling of the fact that what mattered the most was the possibility to identify the roles, rather than the specific character. In each show *isso* and *essa* could be named Giovanni or Ciro, Anna or Carmela, but their individual identity was less important than their reciprocal positioning within the plot as “types” of people representative of life in the *vicolo*.

It was through the male characters’ identifiable attitude towards women that *sceneggiata* allowed the distinction between the virtuous and the villainous to be made clear to the knowledgeable spectator. The main task of the melodramatic dramaturgy is to reveal what may be right before our eyes but unrecognized. Given the nature of *sceneggiata* as produced by, for, and in the community that enjoyed it, the main masculine conflict over winning or stealing a woman’s love was a cliché in which virtue represented the proper way of being within the community, while villainy delimited the obvious traits that had to be expelled from the community. The opposition worked to frame masculinity in relation to a woman’s body and her virtue, and to present the ideal moral of the *vicolo*. Since *sceneggiata* was a formulaic genre, it was less about unveiling the moral, which one would assume was already shared by spectators and performers, and more about the creation of a recognizable dialogue with the audience around that moral. In other words, spectators did not expect, and did not want, any surprise in *sceneggiata*’s plots, but definitely appreciated the performers’ talent to narrate the *vicolo*’s moral world and, through that narration, to entail their inner emotions.

What made the genre unique in its own terms were two characteristics: an artistic and a social one. As far as the former is concerned, instead of using an original score specifically written for each play, authors of *sceneggiata* borrowed a pre-existing famous song that the audience was already familiar with and built a script around the narrative of that song, enlarging, extending, amplifying, and at times distorting the themes that the tune touched upon. The point was to attract audiences to the theatre based on the title of the famous song, which functioned as an element that spectators could trust to enjoy the evening. The socio-cultural body of the audience is the second defining element of *sceneggiata*. The theatre venues where the shows played each night were located near the city’s main

train station, in low-income areas inhabited by workers who attended the performances at very affordable prices. The performers were often born and raised in the same areas, and even when they rose to fame, they kept a link with their origins and childhood friends. Therefore, they acted out a sort of neorealist embodiment of the suffering of their spectators. *Sceneggiata*'s characters lived a life and worked jobs that were, all in all, similar to their audiences. In a word, *sceneggiata* created a self-referential world that mixed fiction and reality, yet providing an efficient entertainment.

Sociologically speaking, *sceneggiata* is a representation of life in the *basso*. The *basso* was the typical living quarter of low-income and under-educated people. Located at or below street level, this one room hovel had one door/window opening directly on the street, which constituted the only source of natural light and air. The inside was sometimes subdivided into smaller separate areas for sleeping and dining by curtains hanging from the ceiling. The average family in the *basso* saw the cohabitation of mother, father, sometimes the older generation of grandparents, and definitely a large number of children. The claustrophobic and unsanitary living conditions in the *basso*, combined with Naples's mild climate, constituted the main reason why life in the *vicolo* developed for the most part outside, in the street. People in the *vicolo* lived an outdoor life, and they carried out most of their activities in the public eye, even those that modern life would normally associate with the private space of one's household. Washing clothes, taking a bath, cooking, breastfeeding kids, eating and so on, for the most part, occurred outside as if the street was a natural addition to the one-room *basso*. This meant that life in the *vicolo* was a communal event, constantly carried out under the scrutinizing eye of everyone else who lived in the same street. This communal lifestyle created a pervasive and efficient check system on all unusual activities and foreign persons who happened to walk in the area. The shared daily activities also included a series of minor illegal actions such as the black market of cigarettes, medicines, or food. The watchful eye provided by the community's life of the *vicolo* greatly contributed to forms of constant social pressure upon its inhabitants, which the *sceneggiata* narrated in the trinity of *isso*, *essa*, and *'o malamente*. The community in the *vicolo* functioned as an external, independent body requiring that every single individual who belonged to it acted according to the rules of the *vicolo*. Little did it matter that most times these street rules clashed against the official law of the State.

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

To be part of this social dynamic one had to respond to the customs of the street, to the moral judgment and life predicament that the *vicolo* had developed in order to allow its inhabitants to survive notwithstanding unemployment, lack of formal education, absence of culture and so on. The public entity *vicolo* dominated the individual choices of its people, and most times individuals had to act and respond to satisfy the expectations of the surroundings rather than to follow their own ideas and feelings.

The gender dynamic in *sceneggiata* perfectly exemplifies the tension between the outside social peer pressure, on the one hand, and individual free will, on the other. Typically, *sceneggiata* starts with the presentation of a problem caused by the disrespect of the communal bounds of the *vicolo*, passes through the individual self-questioning of a tortured soul, and ends with the resolution of that same problem when stability and continuity are restored through the return of the lost individual into the appropriate boundaries of expected behaviors or his/her punishment. Words like honor, vengeance, betrayal, and respect play a central role in the construction of the dramaturgical plot that represents a journey from the disarticulation of the relation between community and self to the reconstruction of that stability, respecting the millenarian structure of drama.

Social pressure affects men and women alike. Since vital space in the *vicolo* is overcrowded and built upon a continuity between the indoor and the outdoor, it would be limiting to theorize that men and women lived in separate spaces, and only in the company of their peers. The street was not the space of exclusive masculine freedom, and home was not limited to the work of women. Spaces were inter-gendered due to their own urbanistic and social constituencies. Given such context, social pressure was exercised by everyone, willingly or unwillingly, through ritualistic, non-written rules and customs that had required many decades of sedimentation. Women suffered from peer pressure and from the objectification of their bodies as the location of desire by the male counterpart or scrutinized as fit for childbearing by other women. Their freedom was policed by male family members and older women of the *vicolo* alike. Men, on the other hand, lived in obedience to restricting rites of passage that required a continuous showcase of deference for the dominant male or group of males that provided the *vicolo*'s internal security and managed petty crimes. Men had also to respond to rules of conduct that kept sexual desire

under control, so that women of the *vicolo* would be respected. Social pressure derived from the distinction between “social construction of masculinity” and “masculine social norms” (Addis, Reigeluth, and Schwab 81). While the latter constitutes a decision-making process through which men define the boundaries of their gender, and consequently the boundaries of femininity as well, the “social construction of masculinity” concerns the collective identity based on customs, traditions, and generations that the *vicolo* embodies as an independent decision maker.

In *sceneggiata* men fall within four types of characters: *isso* (the male protagonist as the betrayed husband), *’o malamente* (the bad guy, the lover), the *mamo* (the comic guy, the naive type), and *’o nennillo* (the kid). Men are usually husbands, lovers, or sons. The figure of the father is unimportant and most times absent. *Sceneggiata* privileges male horizontal relations, rather than vertical or inter-generational ones. Patriarchal capitalism attempting to organize gender in forms that reproduce exploitative relations takes the shape of *isso* and *’o malamente*. *Isso* is usually the married man, he who has on his shoulders the social weight of a numerous family that he must feed and protect. On the contrary, *’o malamente* is generally an unmarried man who has little interest in settling down and finding a job. *’O malamente* tends to waste his time courting women, including those who are married. This duality, in itself, contains all the elements of the *vicolo* that can justify both the socio-anthropological research around *sceneggiata*, and its aesthetic and conceptual characteristics.

The premise of each *sceneggiata*, which is also one of its biggest contradictions, is that it seems almost impossible for people in the *vicolo* to live an honest life, even when they are well intentioned. The government has betrayed them, not providing Naples with economic perspectives of growth, employment, and the quality of services that a modern city should have. This failed modernization, which greatly affected the city sub-proletariat, caused it to be impossible for people to live according to the law. *Isso* has to make ends meet and work through the interstices of legality to bring home food. That is why *isso* often ends up dealing in the black market for cigarettes, sometimes medicines, some other times food. The State is always present in *sceneggiata* in the double repressive forms of the police and the courthouse/jail. *Isso*’s jail time is the perfect occasion for *’o malamente* to intrude into his family and manipulate his wife, oftentimes with the alluring

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

promises of little gifts, until she gives in to courtship and ends up committing adultery. Because the *vicolo* knows and sees everything, the news reaches *isso* in jail and, from that moment on, his mind focuses on revenge and nothing else. When he finally returns home, *isso* confronts *'o malamente* in a duel, called *zumpata*, but usually ends up killing his wife rather than his rival (Grano 75).

Given that *sceneggiata* was predominantly conservative in nature, it required that spectators would identify with the victim, that is to say *isso*, whose suffering must be rendered more visible and legitimate. The betrayed man is the character who went through the real melodramatic arc of suffering and repenting, and therefore the identification with his personal story allowed an abstract reconciliation with the community. *Sceneggiata* frames *isso* as the victim, rather than the murdered woman, as his sacrifice has been physical (low-paid jobs, illegal trafficking and jail) and emotional (giving up the love of his wife and being left a widower or single parent). Such is the requirement of the *vicolo* to reinstitute proper gender boundaries and preserve its internal stability.

The social pressure of the all-knowing *vicolo* takes the form of *'a mmasciata* (information spread by word of mouth) inside the prison's walls. The extension of the *vicolo* beyond its urban city limits is an acceptable product of the collective social life of proletarians. The act of telling a man that his wife is having an affair doesn't go against the concept of honor, which is the key word in being a man, but it actually functions to reinforce that dominant masculine value. To bring the news to a jailed friend or comrade is a way for men to solidify their peer structure, to validate the unwritten rules of camaraderie, and to assess once again the shared role that they each play within the social machine of the *vicolo*. If a man's decision has repercussions on the male group to which one belongs, it becomes clear that *isso* must be informed and constantly trained to embody the values of manhood (Bell 86). Spying on a friend's woman, to keep her virtue and demeanor under control, is not only desirable but also required in terms of male social bonds and self-defense. The interesting fact is that, often times, the initial word of mouth doesn't originate within the male community, but initiates because another woman, a family's friend or *isso*'s mother, discovers the truth. Likewise, it is often a woman, again the protagonist's mother or sister, who travels to the prison and, either in the prison parlor or from beyond the walls,⁵ passes the information and initiates the tragic arc which will lead to *essa*'s

death. The news that reaches *isso* in jail is a sort of common knowledge of the community of reference in a world where nothing is private, or better where what is private is intrinsically also public because the blurring of the two is the only way that the *vicolo* has to ensure its own safety, stability and continuity. The *'mmasciata* is also a clear example of how gendered actions and reactions overlap in contributing to narrate a story that is neither exclusively masculine or feminine, but one in which both men and women can take upon themselves the task of protecting the *vicolo*. From the moment the news of infidelity is out, spectators know that when *isso* will be released, he will have to vindicate his honor, or he will lose his name in front of the whole community. In the sceneggiata *Carcerate* (1964), for instance, the *'mmasciata* brings the protagonist to sing⁶:

*... ll'aggio saputo!.. S'è mmisa
cu nato!
Overamente? Che mappina 'e
chesta!
Io po' avarria stà sempe
carcerato!
Ma mo' che nn'esco! E chi s'ha
visto s'ha visto!
Mannaggia 'o prisirente
scellerato!*

*. . . I've heard! ... She is with
someone else!
Really? What a bastard he must
be!
I will not be in jail forever!
When I'll come out! All will
end!
Damn that wretched judge!*

According to Michael Herzfeld, who conducted extensive research on the formation of masculinity in the Mediterranean area, in traditional patriarchy real men must not be good men, but men who are good at being men. A man's masculinity, his virile attitude, his appropriateness and hence his goodness are all determined in the open space, in the communitarian space, in the public space where he must fiercely embody the role for everyone (43). Based on this premise, the *vicolo's* community does not only expect that a man will kill his own wife, but that seems the only possibility to purify the man's bad reputation and the woman's sin. It is relevant to stress that *isso* does not kill out of a broken heart, which would mark him as feminized, but out of respect for the code of honor in which he has been trained since childhood. However, the abandonment to excessive emotions implicit in a vindictive scheme also marks him as a "melodramatized man [who] appropriates female suffering in

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

the service of a beleaguered masculinity” (Rowe 196). Paradoxically, the affective movement towards sympathy, obtained through this appropriation, allows the audience to interpret the protagonist of *sceneggiata* as a positive character, a good husband, father and man, even if he breaches the Catholic commandment of “thou shalt not kill.” *Isso*’s active embracing of the *vicolo*’s violent codes of honor marks him as morally respectable, and paradoxically proves to other women in the *vicolo* that he is a suitable partner.

Sceneggiata frames *isso*’s goodness from the beginning, as he is a married man with kids. In Naples’s early twentieth century proletarian society, family ties represented the only sign for social success. A married man has complied with the reproductive requirements and is inherently good. That is why in *sceneggiata*, on the other hand, ‘*o malamente* is either single or, if he is married, he has no kids. This puts into question his ability to procreate and, therefore, his right to be an appropriate member of the group. Being good is not an abstract moral entity, but the ability of the man to act in accordance with the informal law of the community. The productive good man is the one who can implicitly understand and embody street wisdom, which is also at the base of survival skills when everything else, from political support to economic stability and culture, is missing. When *isso* is violent, he is so for reasons that the *vicolo* not only perceives as correct, but has also determined and reproduced as such for generations. The act of defending his own good name places the protagonist in the position of defending the honor of the *vicolo* overall and gives him an aura of respectability in the eyes of the members of the community. In *Malufiglio* (1963), for instance, the husband confronts his wife with a revealing song:

<i>‘A stima d’ ‘o quartiere sto perdendo, a quanno m’aggio miso nzieme a tte... Ma tu si’ ‘ngrata e ancora nun t’arrienne a vulè bene solamente a me!</i>	I am losing the neighborhood's respect since I started dating you... but you are ungrateful and still haven't made your mind that you must love me and no one else!
---	---

While the *vicolo* approves and supports the murdering man, obviously the police and the judicial system’s reaction to the murder does not take a sanctioning approach. Spectators do not perceive the

fact that *isso* is put to trial and sentenced to many years in prison as a punishment, as the *vicolo* puts street laws on top of the positive laws of the State. Break the latter, but never the former. *Isso*'s real punishment would be to be rejected by his social group, had he not carried out the required murder. Instead, after the murder, *isso* does not attempt to escape the arrest, but he embraces it as the consequence of his rightful act. He has satisfied the thirst for justice of the *vicolo* by killing, and will satisfy the thirst for justice of the State by going to jail. *Isso*, the man of honor, is condemned from the beginning of *sceneggiata* to choose between jail and social death, between the loss of his civil rights and the loss of his communitarian identity in the *vicolo* (Scialò 26).

The test of virility, as any rite of passage, is common to all the men living in the *vicolo*. Not everyone can pass that test because it is harsh and requires a self-imposed discipline, a wise knowledge of roles and the willingness to abandon individual identity in favor of the group. This is where the *vicolo*'s social pressure on masculinity takes its toll. The dynamic is clear in many *sceneggiata* where, in the last act, *isso* is brought in front of a judge and the singer bursts into a final song that exalts the meaning and value of his actions. For instance, in *A legge* (1922), based on E.A. Mario's song written in 1919, the protagonist first addresses the police officers who are arresting him with this verse:

<i>Mm'ammanettate ccà che mme</i>	You handcuff me, who cares!
<i>ne 'mporta!</i>	This is your duty, here I am...
<i>Chisto è duvere vuosto ccà</i>	I have no regrets: did I kill her?
<i>stongh'i'...</i>	Is she dead?
<i>Nun me ne pento: ll'aggio</i>	This is how the comedy was
<i>accisa? È morta?</i>	supposed to end!
<i>Chesta cummedia era fernì accusì!</i>	

Later, when he stands in front of the judge, he proclaims:

<i>Tu, giudice,</i>	You, judge
<i>mm'accuse mme cundanne...</i>	you accuse me, you convict
<i>ma tu accusì nun rappresiente</i>	me...
<i>'a legge.</i>	if you do it, you do not represent
<i>Gente cchiù pegge ll'hè mannate</i>	the law.
<i>a libertà...</i>	You set free people who are
<i>pienzace tu!</i>	worse than me...

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

<i>Tu 'a casa m'hè 'a mannà</i>	think about it!
<i>si 'a legge è legge!</i>	You must send me back home if the law is the law!

The tragic end of *sceneggiata* became such a cliché that some shows started to play a meta-theatrical game with spectators, as in the song ‘*O rre d’ 'a sceneggiata*’ (1982), written for Mario Merola, which blurred fiction and reality:

<i>'Ncopp' 'a nu palcoscenico</i>	On a stage
<i>io canto 'a che so'nato</i>	I started singing the moment I
<i>io dint' 'e sceneggiate songo 'o</i>	was born
<i>rre!</i>	I am the king of <i>sceneggiata</i> !
<i>Quando la donna perfida</i>	When the evil woman
<i>tradisce a l'uomo amato</i>	betrays the loved man
<i>P' 'a legge d' 'o triato: ha dda</i>	she must die: this is the theatre's
<i>muri</i>	law.
<i>E 'o pubblico in delirio</i>	And the raving audience
<i>pe' forza ha dda appludì.</i>	must applaud.

Since *sceneggiata* was a “hyperbolically emotional display intended to garner sympathy, persuade, or distract” (Pine 54), ‘*o malamente*’ fit the alternative role to the good guy to enhance that educational and persuasive goal. The bad guy, as mentioned above, is either unmarried or childless. Due to the centrality of the familiar ties and group belonging, being unwed or biologically unproductive marks him as the bad example not to be followed, as the disturbing element of the seemingly organized micro-society of the *vicolo*. I define it seemingly organized because, it should be clear by now, that the *vicolo* itself produced the rules that organized this street microcosm, and only its inhabitants knew and shared those rules. How does social pressure operate on ‘*o malamente*? Allegedly it does not, as he must embody the negative rejection of these unwritten canons. If we accept this hypothesis then, paradoxically, we could interpret ‘*o malamente*’ as a freer, liberated, independent man, as an individual that does not need social recognition to feel like an accomplished man. Instead, if we judge the character from within the thematic and aesthetic boundaries of *sceneggiata*, ‘*o malamente*’ is an anarchic figure that lacks the biological and cultural skills to prove his masculinity to the social group around him.

Even if we put aside the fact that he does not fulfill the reproductive duties of manhood, *sceneggiata* frames 'o *malamente* between two negative polarities: a bullying, predatory attitude towards *essa*, and a remissive or fearful attitude towards *isso*. The bad guy is what Neapolitans refer to as *guappo 'e cartone* or *ommo 'e niente*, which insinuates that his deep nature is rooted on a pseudo masculinity. Many songs describe the final duel between *isso* and 'o *malamente*. Most of the derogatory terms that the betrayed man uses against the antagonist highlight two main types of betrayal. The first is the break of the male bond, since 'o *malamente* disrespects the implicit honor code among men. The second marks 'o *malamente* with more ignominy, because he often flees from the crime scene and he cowardly does not intervene to defend the woman whose virtue he has violated from the husband's vengeance. For instance, *Pupatella* (1916) ends with the protagonist singing:

[...] <i>Viene, abballa, strignete a me...</i>	[...] Come, dance, hug me...
<i>Quanno abballe – sì sempe tu...</i>	When you dance – you'll never change...
<i>'o vè l'amico tuoio ca sta tremmano.</i>	look at your friend, he is shaking.
<i>Pupatè....</i>	Pupatè....
<i>'O vede ca i' te scanno ma nun t'aiuta a te!!!</i>	He sees I am killing you but he does not help you!!!
[...]	[...]
<i>Ch'è, tu triemme? - ma ch'ommo sì?</i>	Why are you shaking? - What kind of man are you?
<i>Jesce, abballa! - che guarde a ffà?</i>	Come out, let's get to it! - What are you looking at?
<i>'A vè ca stesa 'nterra è sempe bella!</i>	You see, she looks beautiful even lying on the floor!
<i>Pupatè</i>	Pupatè
<i>e abballa 'a tarantella</i>	dance the tarantella
<i>ca fore aspetto a tte!</i>	I'll wait for you outside!

While the vindictive violence of *isso* is legitimate in terms of the *vicolo*'s rules, the violence or the behavior of 'o *malamente* is outside of all logic and acceptability, both for the *vicolo* and for the State. In the 1970s, when *sceneggiata* developed into filmed adaptations, *isso* kept the qualities of a man of honor, while the figure of 'o *malamente* turned into a *camorrista*, a man affiliated

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

with organized criminal groups that did not follow the *vicolo*'s ethics. While the petty street illegality of the *vicolo* deals primarily with cigarettes, for instance, the *camorrista* controls the heavy drugs market, which is a definitive step up into the scale of illegality. Likewise, the *camorrista* often carries out shootings and murders that twist the original notion of honor. In fact, *isso*'s honor is detached from the mere sexual act of possessing a woman, and relates to the interpretation of masculine roles in the *vicolo*, that is to say the ability of the man to find economic resources for his family, to maintain, protect and control his wife and kids. In the *camorra*, instead, the notion of family or kin enlarges to cover all the male affiliates of a criminal group. This informal relation, with violent rites of passage and affiliation canons, becomes more determining in the existence of a man than his original family or *vicolo*. That is why the *vicolo* perceives 'o *malamente/camorrista* as a traitor of the social bond, as an outcast. 'O *malamente* puts his individual desires, his thirst for power, money, and social climbing over the collective ideology. This claim for independence may appear as a sign of modernity, clashing against the traditional values embodied by *isso*. Since *sceneggiata* is a rather reactionary and conservative entertainment, 'o *malamente* betrays the collectivity of spectators to which he belongs, and therefore he loses his virility, his identity, and his place in the community.

Sceneggiata's secondary male characters, the *mammo* and 'o *nennillo*, play specific functions within the dramaturgical arc of the script, and also in terms of its sociological interpretation. The *mammo*, or comic co-protagonist, is the comedic counterpart that can subvert the rules of the *vicolo* without this turning into a moral judgment of his choices. He plays the role of the village fool. The need for such character is mostly utilitarian because, along with the female comedian called *vaiassa*, he lightens up the main storyline with a secondary, parallel narrative which showcases a weak masculinity crushed under the funny yet manipulative power of a woman. This description provides another insight on the nuances of masculinity in the *vicolo*. Somehow, we could parallel the *mammo* with Jacqueline Reich's theorization of the *inetto* in Italian comedies as a character "at odds with and out of place in a rapidly changing political, social and sexual environment" (XII). His masculinity and virility, oftentimes exaggeratedly displayed in public occasions, while chatting with other male friends, clashes and provides comic relief with what happens in the private of his household, where he

appears almost impotent, and definitely feminized, by the presence of a strong and masculinized woman who knows better than him how to navigate the interstices of the complex society of the *vicolo*, making money out of it and surviving.

Instead, *'o nennillo* (the kid) functions as a consolidation of the pathetic emotional force of the *sceneggiata* through two powerful narrative devices: *'o nennillo* is either left orphan, as his mother dies and his father goes to jail, or he dies of an illness that momentarily reunites his family around his death bed. Both ways, the young kid does not reconstitute male bonding with the father figure, as he is being cared for by the family's older generation of women. As is traditional in patriarchal societies, informal tutoring and street savvy attitudes are passed onto the new generation by women rather than by men. This further complicates the gender dynamic of *sceneggiata* because *'o nennillo* receives the education about male values of honor by women, once again dismantling the misconception of gender roles as Manichean worlds separated by unbreakable walls. In *sceneggiata* both the *mammo* and *'o nennillo* bring the audience's heightened emotions towards one extreme end of the spectrum: laughter or tears, with the latter being a dominant reaction in the main pathetic storyline of the melodrama.

Essa and 'a mamma: Female Dramaturgical Tropes

Critics of *sceneggiata* accused the genre of being inauthentic because it provided an extremely simplified and patriarchal vision of male dominance and female subjugation (Baffi 24). However, what may be blamed as a reductionist approach to the relational discursivity between masculine and feminine, hid many nuances of performative instances that showcased an inclination towards the understanding of gender as a flexible and permeable process. Female characters were not mere passive receivers of the morbid attention of men. They had ample agency in constructing the melodramatic arc of the show, as previously exemplified by the role that women had in starting and passing on a *'masciata* to the protagonist in jail, or by the educational part played by older women of the family in teaching the *vicolo*'s rules to their grandsons. Notwithstanding the multiplicity of female agency, it is certain that the masculine duality of *isso* and *'o malamente* acquired dramaturgical meaning primarily because of their fight over a woman's possession. In this sense, *sceneggiata* did not distance itself from the traditional dual tropes of women as saints or whores.

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

Early *sceneggiata* produced an imagery that aligned women, metaphorically, to an outdated pairing of mother and untouchable virgin, sometimes collapsing the two into the same character. In *Lacrime Napulitane* (1925), for instance, the migrant son writes to his mother back in Naples, expressing the vision of a suffering mother who waits for his son to return home in these terms:

<i>ma a vuie ve sonno comm 'a na'</i>	I dream of you as a Madonna,
<i>Maria,</i>	with swords on your chest
<i>cu 'e spade 'mpietto</i>	in front of a crucified son.
<i>'nnanz 'o figlio 'ncroce</i>	

The same *sceneggiata* addresses the *malafemmina*, the evil woman who stands on the opposite end of the spectrum, with these lyrics:

<i>Assassina ca si'</i>	You are a murderer
<i>e nun te bbasta chello ca t'aggio</i>	you are not happy with the
<i>dato</i>	things I gave you
<i>primm' 'e tutto 'a ggioventù</i>	first and foremost my youth
<i>m'è miso 'mmocca a 'nu</i>	You disrespected me in front of
<i>quartiere sano</i>	the neighborhood
<i>aggio lassato 'a casa 'e mamma</i>	I left my mother's home
<i>mia</i>	to come and live with you
<i>pe' venì a vivere cu te</i>	surrounded by all these
<i>'mmiezzo 'a sta massa 'e</i>	parasites.
<i>mangiafranco.</i>	

The image of the mother's home, the space of safety and nostalgia, stands in stark opposition to the ignominy brought onto the family by the inappropriate behavior of the *malafemmina*, who embodies all the characteristics recognizable in the trope of the fallen woman in Italian opera: the ability to manipulate a man's senses and his destiny, a life spent beyond her economic means, her predestined tragic ending as an act of conservative closure to balance the excesses of her past (Champagne 87).

Sometimes the woman is actually innocent, and the ignominious mark of unfaithfulness comes from a jealous female friend who spreads a *maldicenza*, a gossip. To subvert the stigma, a woman can react with strength and dignity to the accusation, embracing the codes of honor and respectability that she subtracts

FURNO

from the exclusive pertinence of men, as exemplified in the lyrics in *Lacrime Napulitane* that *essa* sings to her husband:

<i>Ue 'nun tucca 'a famiglia mia,</i>	Do not diss my family
<i>ossà</i>	If you are unhappy pack your
<i>Si nun te cunviene fatt' 'e</i>	bags
<i>valigie</i>	and go [...]
<i>e cagna aria [...]</i>	Come on, do it
<i>E fallo, te'</i>	do you want a gun? A knife?
<i>vuo' 'na pistola? 'O curtiello?</i>	Show me how you'll kill me.
<i>Famm' 'a vedè comme</i>	
<i>m'accide.</i>	

If femininity takes the shape of *'a mamma*, the motherly repository of care and familiar warmth, and the *malafemmina*, the unfaithful wife and the manipulative virago, *sceneggiata* builds a tension between the two upon their conflicting relationship with the man in the family. When this conflict bursts, authors of *sceneggiata* generally direct the spectators' sympathy towards the older generation. *'A mamma* embodies traditional values, continuity and respect for the *vicolo* and hence represents the collective identity better than the young wife can do. In *Malufiglio* (1963), for instance, these lyrics interpreted by a tormented man exemplify the tension:

<i>Malufiglio.</i>	Badson.
<i>Mamma accussì me chiama</i>	Mom calls me badson
<i>Malufiglio</i>	because I do not listen to the
<i>pecchè nun stongo a sentere 'e</i>	advices
<i>cunsiglie</i>	she gives me to keep me safe!
<i>ca sempe essa me dà per me</i>	
<i>salvà!</i>	

The cultural caging into extreme tropes of femininity combines preconceptions that involve at once the body, the status and the generational gap among women. People in the *vicolo* judge a woman's moral status on the basis of her willingness to abide by the physical and emotional ability to produce and replicate forms of care: care towards her husband through the respect of the wedlock and her standing by him in supporting his public social role and good name; care towards a young child through the supply of home-cooked meals and shelter, more rarely of emotional support; finally

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

care towards a grown up son in the figure of the waiting mother who sits by the fireplace at home suffering, crying and despairing for his misdoings. However, at the same time the people of the *vicolo* respect a strong woman, either able to keep her moral and physical strength in the face of inappropriate courtship, or able to fill in the shoes of a jailed husband and take into her hands the economic control of the household.

In *sceneggiata*, the *vicolo*'s social order is always under attack through the female body. This happens, for instance, when a man harasses a young girl to get sexual favors, imposing his social status upon her. Sometimes the opposite can happen too, as when a strong-willed and mature woman dismantles the family as she prays on a friend's young and unexperienced son or brother. Other times, a woman is the victim of a violence and this trauma forces her to abandon a morally correct life to become evil herself. More rarely, the woman seeks her own revenge without asking the intervention of a man from the family. The plot variables can take many directions: the *malafemmina* betrays *isso* who then seeks revenge by *sfregio*, scarring the woman's face, or *zumpata*, a duel with '*o malamente*'; it may also happen that *isso* emigrates from Naples to escape the shame derived from betrayal or, more rarely, to escape capture after taking revenge; '*o malamente* may flee the *vicolo* after he has disrespected a married woman, doubling up her and his shame; '*a mamma* or '*o nennillo* get ill and die, which brings the plot to conclusion with dramatic climactic pathos made of nostalgia, guilt, and repentance. Without doubts, the *malafemmina* is hardly ever a real protagonist of the play, but she functionally serves as the antagonist. In any case, in *sceneggiata* the dominant woman, the *malafemmina*, or the *guappa*, cannot succeed because that would represent too much of a revolutionary claim in terms of acceptable gender balance in the *vicolo*'s society. The representation of appropriate female behaviors, articulated in a multiplicity of actions that did not follow a mere gender distinction, balanced the educational intent of the *vicolo*'s value system taught through *sceneggiata*.

The persistence of cross-gendering skills and roles in Naples's *vicolo* establishes the possibility for men and women to share a good number of tasks. This representation once and for all dismantles the traditional view of melodrama as a female genre, whose display of emotions feminized performers and spectatorship alike. The dialogical relation between genders obviously functions

at its best when *sceneggiata* frames the family as central to the show's dramaturgical arc. Both *essa* and 'a *mamma* tell, through their actions, the story of how much a man is fit for his social public role, because it is through family that a man can build and prove his respectability and honor. Probably the most famous depiction of the relevance of this role is in the song 'O *zappatore* (1928) about a poor peasant confronting his son who has become a lawyer, a respectable member of Naples's middle class. Since the son has achieved a status outside of the *vicolo*, he has cut all ties with his family because he is ashamed of his poor background. The father interrupts a posh party and confronts his son in a very dramatic scene, singing:

<i>Mamma toja se ne more.</i>	You mother is dying.
<i>O ssaje ca mamma toja more e te chiamma.</i>	You know your mom is dying and calls your name?
<i>Meglio si te 'mparave zappatore ca o zzappatore nun s' 'a scorda 'a mamma.</i>	You would have been better off as a tiller because a tiller would never forget his mom.
<i>Te chiamma ancora 'gioia' e arravugliata dint' 'o scialle niro</i>	She still calls you 'sweetheart' all wrapped in her black shawl
<i>dice 'mo torna core 'e mamma soia.</i>	she says 'he will come back soon, my darling.
<i>Se vene a piglià ll'urdemo suspiro'.</i>	He will come and catch my last sigh.'

Lacrime Napulitane describes a similar pathetic feeling, primarily using nostalgia as the narrative device connecting mother and son. In the main song, a Neapolitan boy who migrated to the United States feels homesick at Christmastime and writes a letter to his mother in which the longing for home conflates the city and the mother into a unique vision of suffering:

<i>Mia cara madre</i>	My dearest mom
<i>sta pe' trasi' Natale</i>	Christmas is coming
<i>e a sta' luntano chiù me sape amaro.</i>	and being far away feels worse than ever.
<i>Comme vurria appiccìa' duje tre biancale,</i>	I wish I could light some fireworks,
<i>comme vurria senti' nu</i>	I wish I could hear bagpipes

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

<i>zampognaro!</i>	playing!
<i>'E ninne mie facitele 'o Presepio</i>	Make the crib for my kids
<i>e a tavola mettite 'o piatto mio:</i>	and put my plate on the table:
<i>facite, quanno e' a sera d' 'a</i>	at Christmas' Eve pretend
<i>Vigilia,</i>	that I am there with you [...]
<i>comme si' mmiezo a vuje stesse</i>	America takes a toll of tears
<i>pur 'io [...]</i>	on Neapolitans!
<i>E 'nce ne costa lacreme st'</i>	For us, who cry and miss
<i>America</i>	the sky of Naples,
<i>a nuje Napulitane!</i>	this bread tastes bitter!
<i>Pe' nuie, ca 'nce chiagnimmo</i>	
<i>o cielo e Napule,</i>	
<i>comme e' amaro stu' pane!</i>	

The majority of the characters in *sceneggiata* are mothers and wives who constantly act under the scrutinizing eye of the street: cooking, cleaning, washing, attending children are all shared, public activities. The outdoor and community life of the *vicolo* is the ideal location for the multiplicity of the crowd, of the overlapping of sounds and voices among which, little by little, one specific story becomes predominant within the plot. The chorus of the *vicolo* is predominantly a female thing. Therefore, women hold a tremendous responsibility in the creation of that pervasive social pressure that, eventually, will fire back at them. The traditional patriarchal exploitation which brings women to succumb to male values, or sometimes to receive a limited and temporary salvation or gratification, also causes men to succumb to the social pressure on manhood that women contribute to construct and reproduce. In this interpretation, *sceneggiata* is an entertaining musical form that contains a deeply dark, pessimistic and reactionary view of life in Naples's poor neighborhoods.

However, female characters can also provide comic relief through the figure of the *vaiassa*. As in the best tradition of comedy, the *vaiassa* is a loud woman, not in the prime of her life, not necessarily beautiful, but with a certain ability to manipulate men to obtain what she wants. The contrast between her physical appearance and her seduction skills provides many occasions for laughter. Act two of *sceneggiata* revolved around the comedic energy of the *vaiassa* vexing the *mammo*, putting under the spotlight the ridiculous schematic breakdown of men and women as fixed identity markers. It is a fact that through irony, the reactionary

working dynamics of a society can be unveiled and that, by poking fun at a situation or a person, one is actually freer to speak the truth. The ways in which the *vaiassa*, albeit a secondary character in the plot, can subvert the codified rules of behavior, and exploit the *mammo*'s inaptitude to command him to her advantage, is also a breach of the mother-saint pairing. A woman can be both but can also choose to be none of the above. The possibility to empathize with a comic character is directly proportional to the fact that the character is not merely an unrealistic 'type,' but rather an exaggerated version of a real person. Spectators must be able to identify behavioral traits that they may recognize in people from their daily life. The experience of comedy doesn't require, as tragedy does, excessive reflection. One is allowed to the immediacy of the experience. That is only part of the experience, though. Acknowledging similarities and connections between the situation one laughs at in the immediacy, and the memory of past experiences of a similar nature, enhance the pleasure.⁷

Conclusions

As Marcello Ravveduto rightly points out: "The fiction of *sceneggiata* provided a cultural and anthropological model to be imitated in real life. Therefore, when a Neapolitan 'acts' like a Neapolitan, he is actually doing a *sceneggiata*" (20).⁸ I would add that the socio-cultural model of the *vicolo*, predating *sceneggiata*, formed the essential context which provided the fiction with its performative meaning. This analysis applies to the social as much as to the gender dynamic of the proletarian base that constituted the predominant audience of *sceneggiata*. The simplistic and reductive depiction of stock characters, themes and plots responded to the utilitarian needs of artists to speak a comprehensible theatrical language. I claim that *sceneggiata* used this alleged simplification to hide a substratum of complexity and frame a multitude of socio-cultural signs, both representational and non-representational.

This entertaining medium had to be simple for two connected reasons. Firstly, performances were meant to communicate with proletarian spectators, with low or no level of school education. However, the average spectator of *sceneggiata* was a knowledgeable viewer who knew how to unpack the show's messages because he possessed a savvy street culture built up in the *vicolo*. Various accounts of a *sceneggiata* evening narrate of spectators who participated very lively to the performance,

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

interacting verbally and physically with the actors on stage to support and comment on the story. Secondly, *sceneggiata* derived from previous existing forms of mass entertainment such as *commedia dell'arte*, variety shows, *avanspettacolo* and sketch comedies, defined by brevity, musical accompaniment, jokes, recognizable language and stock characters to amuse and describe a parodied reality (Curi 682). Cutting across distinctions of high and low culture, the emergence of *sceneggiata* was coterminous with Naples's entrance into capitalism and modernity, with the connected crisis of the economic, cultural, social and gender bases that informed them. "Earlier folk and current 'popular' traditions overlaid, or coalesced with, 'establishment' dramaturgical and fictional structures, an instance of the tendency of capitalism (and a nascent nationalism) to make use of historically prior forms" (Gledhill 18). The dialogues that *sceneggiata* initiated with its audience was at once a product of this tendency, and crisis, and an attempt to provide a solution through entertainment.

Sceneggiata typically expressed a sense of unfairness which defined the popular experience of lack of power, voicing a protest of the weak against the powerful. The characters often sought to challenge what they perceived as unjust social conventions, imposed by governmental institutions, or to battle with their own past and the way it had trapped them. Yet this struggle was seldom private, but it involved the community of reference. That is why *sceneggiata* often reproduced cultural attitudes of dangerous people, who acted according to scripts that had limited artistic value but fully inhabited the harsh, raw, sentimental and often violent life choices of those who felt left out from Naples's society and found in the *vicolo* their only identification.

Sceneggiata, as melodramatic entertainment, elicited the participation of spectatorship, their senses and empathic reactions to a wide array of feelings. This explains why the genre was functional to the production and understanding of the world of the *vicolo* that surrounded the venues where performers were representing it. The emotional contact, and the pleasure of self-recognition mediated by musical numbers, drove the complicity of spectators as active participants of the very society that it reflected back to them. The physical and emotional melodramatic journey drastically commented upon the cultural constructions at the basis of gendered spaces, roles and relations on and off stage. The mirroring effect between stage and audience played out on the gender biases that

spectators of the proletarian, low-income neighborhoods of Naples experienced on their turn-of-the-century daily life, and could unquestionably recognize in the *sceneggiata*'s scripts. This act of familiarization with the socio-cultural dynamic of the city told a story of manhood and womanhood as collective and interconnected constructions, debunking a misreading of *sceneggiata* as a feminizing genre, or as an acclamation of male subjectivity over female identity.

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NOTES

¹ Translated into English by Robert Lumley as *Apocalypse Postponed* (1994).

² The figure of the *femminiello* is outside the scope of the essay. For further research on the topic, the literature is considerable. See: Annalisa Di Nuzzo, "La città nuova: dalle antiche pratiche del travestitismo alla riplasmazione del femminiello nelle nuove identità mutanti" in *Perversione, Perversioni e Perversi*, ed. by Franco Scalzone, Borla 2009, pp. 143-62. Also: Pino Simonelli and Giorgio Carrano "Le mariage des femminielli à Naples" *Masques. Revue des Homosexualités*, vol. 18, 1983, 105-06. Or: Paolo Valerio and Eugenio Zito, *Corpi sull'uscio, identità possibili. Il fenomeno dei femminielli a Napoli*, Filema, 2010.

³ Actors and singers of *sceneggiata* were often talented performers without a formal training. They had learned the job by working in theaters since a young age. Authors and musicians, instead, were often educated members of the intelligentsia: poets who published both in Italian and Neapolitan, and trained composers who knew how to mix folk instruments with orchestrations based on the piano and strings section.

⁴ *Sceneggiata* was predominantly masculine both on and off stage. However, some actresses became very famous and ran their own companies. For instance, Ria Rosa (1899-1988) was an independent leading woman of *café chantant* and *sceneggiata*, a proto-feminist in a male dominated world. Gilda Mignonette (1886-1953) obtained fame and fortune especially among the Italian migrant communities in the US, where she was known as the queen of migrants. Tina Pica (1888-1968) played secondary roles in some *sceneggiata* before her successful career first in the theatre company led by Eduardo de Filippo and then as a movie star.

⁵ The habit of chatting with inmates from outside the prison walls was very common. Friends and family usually stood on a hill close by and "chanted" relevant information through the use of jargon and codes. The vocal technique was so efficacious that it developed into the singing style called *fronna 'e limone* (lemon leaf). The *fronna* was an a cappella performance made of prolonged vowels and vibratos often used in popular Neapolitan music and *sceneggiata*. See: Raffaele Di Mauro, "Canzone napoletana e musica di tradizione orale: dalla canzone artigiana alla canzone urbana d'autore," *Musica/Realtà*, no. 93, 2010, 133-51.

⁶ All the songs and lyrics quoted in the essay come from Scialò. Translations from Neapolitan mine.

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN NEAPOLITAN SCENEGGIATA

⁷ For an exhaustive summary of critical theories on comedy see: Romanska and Ackerman.

⁸ Translation from Italian mine.

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