Picturing the Fragmented Maternal Body: Rethinking Constructs of Maternity in the Novels of Elena Ferrante and Alice Sebold

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This article explores how Alice Sebold and Elena Ferrante place the feminine – and indeed often the maternal – body at the very centre of their narratives. The body – as a locus that filters the broader tensions and conflicts experienced by their female protagonists – in fact emerges as a key site of 'contestation' (Grosz 1994: 19) in their works. Through a close analysis of a selection of ekphrastic images, and photographic metatexts in particular, I draw attention to how the two authors employ textual negotiations of the feminine body to question and problematize normative conceptions of femininity and motherhood. Ultimately, I suggest that they not only challenge but also shift the perspective of, or indeed refocalize, the dominant visual narrative of the maternal/feminine body and the long history of objectification of the latter. In so doing, I situate the two writers at the forefront of rethinking contemporary constructs of maternity and femininity.

Keywords: Elena Ferrante, Alice Sebold, matricide, violence, cityscape, disease, maternal body, gaze, fragmentation, ekphrasis

In a review article of Alice Sebold's *The Almost Moon* (2007), Elena Ferrante, the pseudonym for the Italian author of the 'Neapolitan novels'[1], draws attention to the near absence of matricidal tales in Western cultural tradition. She notes that maternal killings, and even animosity and rage between mothers and daughters, are 'much less firmly rooted in the [Western literary] imagination' (Ferrante 2007) than their established parricidal counterparts. In fact, portrayals of motherhood in various forms

[1] Ferrante's recent tetralogy of novels, also referred to as the 'Neapolitan novels', includes the following four texts, all published by Edizioni e/o and translated by Ann Goldstein for Europa Editions: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay Behind* (2014) and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015).

of cultural production have long been modelled on the culturally, socially and religiously constructed stereotype of the nurturing, self-abnegating and asexual mother. This is particularly relevant for the Italian Catholic context (D'Amelia 1997), in which any transgressions of the norm are construed as disruptive, abject or aberrant.

Sebold, on the other hand, dares to bring 'the intolerable destructive power of [the mother-daughter] bond' (Ferrante 2007) to the page and moreover manages to do this without compromising the complexity of the female subject. *The Almost Moon* is a novel in which the middle-aged protagonist, Helen, acts out her long-held homicidal urges towards her mother. The opening phrase – 'When all is said and done, killing my mother came easy' (Sebold 2007: 3) – plunges the reader right into the character's subversive course of action.

It is no surprise that Sebold's unforgiving and 'lucidly radical' insight into 'the obscure areas of the mother-daughter relationship' (Ferrante 2007) would appeal to Ferrante. Her own Neapolitan tetralogy indeed shares a fascination for mother-daughter couplings, as well as exploring those very dark, unspoken areas of female family ties, set in a context of domestic and public gendered violence.[2] The Italian author's major works – her latest tetralogy enthusiastically supported by Sebold – provide profoundly conflictual and subversive portrayals of maternity that challenge

[2] In addition to their literary affinities, Ferrante and Sebold share a professional connection: Sebold's translated works in Italy are under contract with Edizioni e/o, the same publishing house that Ferrante has published with since the early 1990s. Moreover, Sebold became the editor of Tonga Books, an imprint of Edizioni e/o's American subsidiary, Europa Editions, in 2011, promising to publish 'edgy' material that is 'unafraid of the dark' (Europa Editions website at http://www.europaeditions.com/news/881/europa-editions-launches-tonga-books; viewed 1 September 2017).

normative constructions of parenthood. While Sebold's *The Almost Moon* dwells on a searing mother-daughter bond that unfolds within a portrait of alienation in post-industrial, suburban Pennsylvania, Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy chronicles the two female protagonists' fraught journeys from daughterhood to motherhood in the diseased and crime-ridden cityscape of post-war Naples, in southern Italy.

Despite the reciprocal public endorsements and the affinitive themes explored, to date there is no comparative study of the significant links between Ferrante's and Sebold's texts. I will address this gap by highlighting some fundamental parallels, with a specific focus on the two author's reflections around the emergence of the female subject. As this article will show, Sebold's *The Almost Moon* and Ferrante's Neapolitan novels explore motherhood and the female subject through textual negotiations of the commodified feminine body and the spaces it inhabits; while Ferrante's texts propose a new, female-focalized perspective on the portrayal of maternity and the feminine body, Sebold's novel provides a provocative reflection on the negative effects of 'postfeminist'[3] constructs of femininity in contemporary society.

The article firstly outlines the extent to which each of the two writers subverts conventional portrayals of motherhood. Drawing on recent work by Adriana Cavarero and on Julia Kristeva's seminal study on maternal abjection, this is followed by an analysis of how gendered violence and conflict are principally negotiated through the feminine body – and indeed often the maternal – in Sebold and Ferrante's writings.

[3] While 'postfeminism' is of course a problematic term in itself, in this article I adopt what I take to be the most defining traits of this cultural development. As Whitney puts it, 'it is a cultural mood deriving from two dubious premises: that gender equity has been achieved and that feminism is now both obsolete and undesirable' (Whitney 2010: 352). For a detailed account of the debates surrounding 'postfeminism', see Gamble 2001.

Following on from this, the article will provide a unique exploration – with reference to Susan Sontag and Marianne Hirsch's work on the photographic metatext – of how the two authors employ a series of ekphrastic images and visual narratives to criticize and refocalize the scopophilic gaze that posits women as the object of the male onlooker.[4] Ultimately, I argue that Ferrante and Sebold are at the forefront of rethinking established constructs of maternity and femininity in contemporary world literature.

Conflictual Mothers, Conflicted Daughters

Ferrante's repulsive mothers

In her first 'trilogy' of novels (*Troubling Love*, 1992*; The Days of Abandonment*, 2002; *The Lost Daughter*, 2008), Ferrante's female protagonists provide profound insights into the darker sides of mothering and of being mothered. Her unadorned portrayals of female characters have earned her the epithet of the 'writer of the unsayable' (Walsh 2014), and her enthusiastic readers widely credit her for 'say[ing] something that hasn't been said before' (Biggs 2015). A heavily polarized maternal experience stands at the very centre of her narrative: the contrasting emotions it evokes range from her female protagonists' intense feelings of love and desire to outright resentment toward and hatred of their own mothers (*Troubling Love*). Moreover, the protagonists undergo an unwelcome confrontation with their leaking, diseased and objectified bodies during pregnancy, and harbour ambivalent feelings

[4] I am here referring to *scopophilia* as theorized by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), in which she argues that women have long been construed as the objects of the male gaze (see Mulvey 1975: 11).

towards their own offspring (*The Days of Abandonment*, *The Lost Daughter*). The writer's first three novels portray a series of troubled mother-daughter couplings, in which pregnancy and motherhood are experienced as moments of crisis by the female characters (see e.g. Ferrante's third novel, *The Lost Daughter*, in which the unborn child evokes both repulsion and a sense of suffocation (Ferrante 2008: 33 [Ferrante 2006b: 35])).

In her most recent literary production, the critically acclaimed tetralogy, many of the same struggles resurface. This epic account of the young girls Lila (also referred to as Raffaella, or Lina) and Elena's (also Lenuccia or Lenù) friendship is set in a deprived Neapolitan neighbourhood in the years following the Second World War. Written from the perspective of the first-person narrator, Elena, the narrative chronicles six decades of their relationship, ranging from early childhood into late adulthood. The complex dynamic of the two girls' intimate bond, which is punctuated by periods of antagonism, rivalry and prolonged silences, dictates the pace of the four-volume work. The narrative focuses on their coming of age and the diverging educational and occupational paths they embark upon. While Elena becomes a famous writer with an international career, Lila marries in her teens and never leaves Naples. What both characters share, however, is a profound sense of 'subalternity', as this article will show.[5] In fact, the two girls are affected by an existential preoccupation and sense of dissolution that Lila coins '*smarginatura'* (Ferrante 2012: 57 [Ferrante 2011: 53]), or the loss of margins, which overcomes them at key stages of their lives.

[5] I am deliberately using the term 'subalternity' rather than 'inferiority' because of its associations with feminist theory and postcolonialism (Spivak 1988), as well as Ferrante's explicit use of the term several times in the tetralogy (see e.g. Ferrante 2013b, 204). The specific theoretical connotations of the term are lost in the translation by Ann Goldstein, where 'subalternità' is translated as 'inferiority' (Ferrante 2014a, 226).

The text is not only interwoven by distinctive moments in which the protagonists and their surroundings 'lose their contours' (Ferrante 2012: 57 [Ferrante 2011: 53]). The narrative additionally consists of intersecting tales of generation/motherhood in a broad sense: daughters become mothers and daughters are mothered, but women also appear as 'generators; of meaning, language, children [and] history' (Clark 2016). In fact, I would go as far as to claim that the phenomenology of generation/maternity in Ferrante's cycle of novels provides a central interpretative key not only for the socio-historical, generational and class conflicts negotiated in the text, but also, more significantly, for the constitution of the female/maternal subject. For instance, Elena's confrontation with her mother, as well as her own (often ambivalent) relationship with motherhood, reveals much about Ferrante's reflections on the feminine subject. Furthermore Elena's mother, Signora Greco, comes to represent a generation of women that is trapped within a cycle of marriage, domesticity and patriarchal violence.

From a very young age, Elena, who is ambitious and academically gifted, is intent on distancing herself from her origins, namely the sub-proletarian and largely illiterate microcosm of the *camorrista*-governed Neapolitan quarter she grew up in. Much of her disdain for the neighbourhood is projected onto the maternal body, which seems to furthermore mirror the flaws of its suburban deprivation. If we regard the body, as suggested by Grosz, as 'a site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions' (Grosz 1994: 23), then the maternal figure in Ferrante's texts becomes a powerful locus of 'contestation' (Grosz 1994: 19), one that filters many of the conflicts that afflict her protagonists.

Much of Elena's rejection of her mother and the generation of women she has come to represent translates into a veritable repulsion for Signora Greco's physical

flaws; she has a lazy eye and a limping, mutilated right leg, and her entire body is construed as supremely abject in its external appearance:

> Her body repulsed me, something that she probably intuited. […] She was dark blonde, blue-eyed, voluptuous. But you never knew where her right eye was looking. Nor did her right leg work properly. She called it her damaged leg. She limped, and her step agitated me. (Ferrante 2012a: 44-45 [Ferrante 2011: 40])

The 'threat' (Ferrante 2013a: 102 [Ferrante 2012b: 101]) emanating from Signora Greco's body continues to haunt Elena throughout key stages of her life, most prominently in pregnancy, when she reluctantly starts limping like her mother. Despite embarking on a radically different educational path that sees her attending Italy's most prestigious university, the *Scuola Normale di Pisa*, the protagonist struggles to rid herself of a deep-seated sense of subalternity (Ferrante 2014a: 226; [Ferrante 2013b: 204]) and class shame that is profoundly rooted in her relationship with her mother. These emotional states are often expressed in the fear of being physically engulfed by her: 'My mother […] limped after me, criticizing me. Sometimes she seemed determined to insert herself into my body, simply to keep me from being my own master.' (Ferrante 2014a: 179 [Ferrante 2013b: 159])

Ferrante's 'aesthetics of disgust' (Milkova 2013: 94), centred on the maternal figure, invites a Kristevan reading of *abjection*, with the protagonist desperately attempting to 'abject' the maternal in order to constitute an independent sense of selfhood. According to Julia Kristeva, maternal abjection, which amounts to a symbolic form of 'matricide' or breaking away from the mother, is a rite of passage that is necessary for the emergence of the subject. It is only when the mother has been

symbolically ‘killed’ that a psychological separation from the narcissistic union with her has been accomplished (Kristeva 2001: 131).[6]

The various forms of disability, deformation and disease (cancer) that affect Signora Greco’s body stand for key elements which Elena tries to liberate herself from in an arduous process distancing her from an oppressive past. In particular, the mother’s limp comes to symbolize a generation of ‘mute’ women that the daughter is intent on leaving behind. As Laura Benedetti has pointed out, one of the novel’s ‘central metaphors’ (Benedetti 2012: 177) lies in the contrast between Lila’s agility (her ‘slender, agile legs’ (Ferrante 2012a: 46 [Ferrante 2011: 42])) and Signora Greco’s near-immobility. Elena’s desire for a definitive separation from her mother, the previous lineage of women and the violence they have come to represent, is expressed through this metaphor: ‘Something convinced me, then, that if I kept up with [Lila], at her pace, my mother’s limp, which had entered into my brain and wouldn’t come out, would stop threatening me.’ (Ferrante 2012a: 46 [Ferrante 2011: 42])

However, maternal repugnance in Ferrante’s narrative cannot be fully captured in the Kristevan notion of abjection. Elena’s choice to follow her friend Lila and to distance herself from her parent introduces an interesting development in the mother-daughter plot that Ferrante has pursued since her earliest novels. The shift of focus is, in itself, a move towards a more complex notion of feminine identity. Lila, in

[6] The Kristevan notion of abjection furthermore preserves an element of ambiguity, with the mother remaining a central point of reference and the object of desire (Kristeva 1982, 32) despite the need to separate from her. As both the other that threatens the boundaries of the self and an intrinsic yet unstable part of the self that “guarantees my being as subject” (Kristeva 1982, 32), the abject remains a complex and often contradictory process (Kristeva 1982, 13) that is often reflected in Ferrante’s ambivalent portrayals of the maternal as both terrifying and desirable.

fact, constitutes a central element of *disruption* in Elena's maternal attachment that allows her to break out of a seemingly endless cycle of violence and deprivation. The separation process from the mother is almost ritually (Cf. de Rogatis 2014) initiated in an episode from the protagonist's early childhood in which her 'bad' friend Lila throws Elena's doll Tina into a dark cellar, a scene which in itself constitutes an uncanny prolepsis of the eventual disappearance of Lila's daughter Tina (who is given the same name as Elena's doll, hence providing a further link to maternity) in the final volume of the series. In the earlier episode with the dolls, a clear sartorial link is established between the toy and Signora Greco: Tina is described as wearing 'a blue dress that [her] mother had made for her in a rare moment of happiness' (Ferrante 2012a: 30 [Ferrante 2011: 26]). According to this interpretation, Lila's throwing the doll into the basement initiates a metaphorical severance of the attachment between mother and daughter. Lila thus emerges as the driving force behind Elena's process of distancing herself from a constrictive maternal bond. The maternal detachment leaves a profound fracture in the protagonist that leads to her first experience of *smarginatura*, which she describes as 'a kind of tactile dysfunction' that encompasses both the world around her ('solid surfaces turned soft under my fingers or swelled up') and her own body ('it seemed to me that my own body, when you touched it, was distended […]' (Ferrante 2012: 57 [Ferrante 2011: 53])).

The repeated use of subalternity and *smarginatura* as defining moments of the two female characters' emerging subjectivities further introduces a conceptual move in Ferrante's narrative that sees Lila and Elena defying the 'logic of the neighborhood' (Ferrante 2012a: 272 [Ferrante 2011: 268]) and resisting the binary structures of power that have long defined their female ancestors' trajectories. In a move that recalls Bhabha's ascription of an 'anti-dialectical movement' to the

subaltern instance that 'subverts any binary or sublatory ordering of power and sign' (Bhabha 1994: 79), Ferrante's female characters seek to establish a liminal, hybrid space in which to articulate a newly complex feminine experience and form that evades the rigid dictates of the neighbourhood, as we shall further explore below.

Sebold

Sebold's fictional daughters similarly struggle to extrapolate themselves from their mothers. *The Almost Moon* is undoubtedly the text that explores filial co-dependence in most depth, but her earlier writings are not without their subversive or unconventional maternal figures. While the mother remains a comparatively marginal figure in Sebold's debut novel, *Lucky* (1999) – a first-person, autobiographically inspired account of the violent rape Sebold suffered as a young college student – various elements in this text foreshadow the author's later reflections on troubled forms of motherhood. The protagonist Alice's mother is forced reluctantly into the role of stay-at-home mother by societal expectations. As the family moves across various locations in the US, where her husband holds temporary academic appointments, she starts suffering from a deep-seated sense of loneliness and a mental illness that drive her to alcohol abuse: '[my mother] never acclimated to her prescribed role as housewife. […] Her father and mine had convinced her to leave her full-time job by emphasizing that a married woman didn't work' (Sebold 2002a: 47).

Alice's 'fragile, suburban' (Sebold 2002a: 56) and 'always potentially collapsing' mother (Sebold 2002a: 48) hence distinguishes herself by her absence: she misses key episodes of her daughter's life, as for instance her rape trial, which is attended by her father instead (Sebold 2002a: 169). Her all-encompassing illness and increasingly unstable presence leave a profound mark on Alice, who desires her

family to be more conventional: ‘I wished my mother were normal, like other moms, smiling and caring, seemingly, only for her family’ (Sebold 2002a: 45).

‘Normality’ is hardly re-established in Sebold’s critically acclaimed second novel, *The Lovely Bones* (2002), which features a mother (Abigail) who suffers a mental breakdown as a consequence of her daughter Susie’s rape and murder. In what critics have referred to as a postfeminist adaptation of the gothic novel (Whitney 2010), the narrative is a first-person account of the developments after Susie’s death, written from the latter’s perspective as she looks on from a secular heaven. The protagonist-narrator chronicles her family’s disintegration as a consequence of her mother’s inability to deal with her grief, ultimately leading her to leave her husband and children to spend several years in California. Susie’s post-mortem observations reveal that Abigail, similar to Alice’s mother in *Lucky*, has suffered from a deep-rooted sense of loneliness (Sebold 2002b: 150) since she became a suburban wife and mother.

Throughout *The Lovely Bones*, another part of the mother’s personality emerges, unveiling a formerly hidden side of her that is visually captured in a photograph her daughter took shortly before her death. This leads Susie to the realization that ‘[her] mother was also someone else and mysterious’ (Sebold 2002b: 45), a difference that embraces the sexual allure (Sebold 2002b: 148) that lies beyond the realm of her maternal qualities. Abigail’s reluctance to commit to motherhood is perceived by her daughter – or at least by the societal expectations Susie has internalized – as a transgression that calls for punishment: Susie believes that Abigail ‘has been punished in the most horrible and unimaginable way for never having wanted me’ (Sebold 2002b: 266).

It is however in her latest work, *The Almost Moon*, that Sebold takes a real plunge into the depths of what Ferrante has referred to as the 'furious love' (Ferrante 2007) between mother and daughter. The novel opens with the middle-aged protagonist Helen – herself the mother of two daughters – resolving to kill her senile mother Clair, who is increasingly weakened by a long-standing mental illness (agoraphobia) and dementia. Once she has suffocated her with some towels, Helen's gaze wanders across her mother's corpse, as she remembers how her entire life has been defined by the consuming relationship with Clair: 'The idea of my mother was eternal like the moon. […] Dead or alive, a mother or the lack of a mother shaped one's whole life […] Only by thinking I had freedom had I come to understand how imprisoned I was.' (Sebold 2007: 184-85)

Intensely aware of both the fascination (foreshadowed perhaps in Susie's enthrallment with the 'mysterious' Abigail) and the hatred evoked by her mother, Helen's entire life unfolds in the presence of her mother's dead body. The killing, as we come to discover, was not a random act but the fulfilment of a life-long wish (Sebold 2007: 58). For Helen, it is as much about possessing Clair – a formerly unreachable, desired object – as it is about liberating herself from a life-long imprisoning hold. 'I hated her more than I'd ever hated anyone. Still, I reached up, as if I were finally allowed to touch a precious thing, and ran my fingers down her long silver braid.' (Sebold 2007: 8; see also Sebold 2007: 103)

As it emerges from her first-person recollections of the past, Helen spent her childhood in isolation from the local neighbourhood, and indeed from any social circle, an exclusion predominantly defined by her mother's mental illness ('"them" were the happy, normal people, and "us" were the totally fucked' (Sebold 2007: 23)), but further reinforced by a sense of social alienation that originates in Clair's southern

roots (Sebold 2007: 125). In an attempt to compensate for her mother's weaknesses, Helen consistently seeks to re-establish her mother's 'lost connection with the world' (Sebold 2007: 252), to act as her 'proxy' (Sebold 2007: 187), resulting in a symbiotic fusion that obliterates the daughter's claim on her own identity.

With even her marriage described as an attempt to escape from her mother's control (Sebold 2007: 82), Helen comes to realise how a powerful force of attraction and desire exuding from her parent has come to shape much of her life: she has returned to the local neighbourhood she grew up in and continues to pay regular visits to her family home. Even Helen's profession as a life model has been inspired by her mother's distant past as a showroom model. In what constitutes a challenge to the prevalence of 'overt displays of femininity' and the 'hyper-femin[ized]' body in postfeminist society (Whitney 2010: 364), Sebold issues a scathing critique of Clair's obsession with physical beauty and its distinctly negative effects on her daughter: not only does the self-discipline she has successfully instilled in her daughter poison their relationship, but it also engenders a bitter sense of rivalry between the two women. The daughter worships and eroticizes her mother's youthful body, whilst she is repulsed by its progressive decline in old age.

With conflictual accounts of maternity occupying the narrative centre of Sebold's and Ferrante's texts, both authors employ portrayals of motherhood to challenge specific aspects of the construction of femininity in their works. In particular, they avow themselves of metatextual visual devices that metonymically portray, dissect and – to some extent – rethink and rebuild the maternal body, as we shall further explore in the following section.

Imaging/Visualizing the Maternal Body

Conventional constructions of the female body often revolve around not only lack or absence but a threatening sense of 'formlessness', as Elizabeth Grosz argues in her seminal work *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*:

> In the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but […] as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; a formless flow […] as lacking […] self-containment, […] a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order. (Grosz 1994: 203)

Both Ferrante and Sebold's works centre on portraying female subjectivities, and specifically they are concerned with giving a new, female-focalized form – in their textual and visual portrayal – to precisely this fragmented, 'dangerous' female body. They thereby provide an alternative reading of the unruliness (of the female body) that has all too often defined male-centred portrayals of femininity.

Maternal/Visual metaphors in Ferrante's tetralogy

Ferrante's texts are littered with visual metaphors of the female body, with *ekphrasis* emerging as an important textual device in these metaphors' focus on physical fragmentation. Her earlier works feature strategically planted images of truncated female bodies (most notably in the numerous gypsy paintings in *Troubling Love*). In the Neapolitan novels, there are several visual narratives or accessorial devices that not only metonymically reflect on the feminine body, but more significantly, they refocalize the formlessness it has often assumed in male-centred narratives of maternity. The most prominent prosthetic accessory that emerges from Ferrante's work is undoubtedly the figure of a doll, a prominent presence in most of her works that, already in *The Lost Daughter*, forms 'the composite body of all Ferrante's

Neapolitan mothers and daughters' (Milkova 2013, 98). In the tetralogy, Lila and Elena's dolls metonymically mirror – and often foreshadow – a series of conflicts, rivalries and tensions that are fundamental to the novel. They thus become an important device that reflects on the complex dynamic of female bonds and subjectivities in the novels.

For the purpose of this article, however, I would like to focus on one of the most striking visual descriptions of the tetralogy, namely, a photo collage portraying Lila as a young bride in her wedding dress that adorns the Solara shop in *The Story of a New Name.* Lila is pregnant with her first child (which she will soon miscarry) while she works on the image, which establishes from the outset a meaningful link between the picture, marriage and maternity. The photo panel, however, does not remain in its original state for long, but it is powerfully manipulated into a collage-style picture of disfigured and fragmented body parts in an intense process of collaboration between Lila and Elena, one that recalls the creative act of writing. Incensed at her possessive husband's treating her like 'merchandise to barter' (Ferrante 2013a: 112 [Ferrante 2012b: 112]), Lila violently truncates, mutilates and recomposes the photograph to the point that it resembles a patchwork of body parts: 'The body of the bride Lila appeared cruelly shredded. Much of the head had disappeared, as had the stomach' (Ferrante 2013a: 119 [Ferrante 2012b: 112]).

The rebellious act of dissecting and recomposing the photograph stands as Lila's powerful attempt to regain control over her body, to give it a new form. The original wedding picture portrays a young woman who is subsumed by the conventions of patriarchal society and who has 'lost her shape' to the point of '[dissolving] into the outlines of [her spouse], becoming a subsidiary emanation of him' (Ferrante 2013a: 124 [Ferrante 2012b: 124]). In her manipulation of the image,

on the other hand, Lila re-appropriates the power that is associated with the photographic gaze and, by extension, with the portrayal of the feminine body. For, as Marianne Hirsch claims: 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself in a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power' (Hirsch 1997: 4). In fact, it is the meta-photographic 'imagetext', the textual decomposition of Lila's image as a spouse, that '[breaks] the hold of a conventional and monolithic familial gaze' (Hirsch 1997: 8). In this instance, it is by placing the woman in the active position of looking, or rather of recomposing her own '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey 1975: 11) that the conventional direction of the gaze is disrupted.

Lila's impending miscarriage furthermore seems to be foreshadowed by the violent visual/textual truncation of her body (and her abdomen in particular), so that it appears as yet another act of protest against her husband's possessive claims on her body. From early on in the pregnancy, Lila had decided to 'fight' against a condition that she perceives as a 'disease' (Ferrante 2013a: 109 [Ferrante 2012b: 109]), as if it were something 'to be crushed in a mortar' (Ferrante 2013a: 112 [Ferrante 2012b: 112]). Indeed, Stefano, Lila's husband, repeatedly claims that his spouse employed her secret powers to single-handedly '[murder] the children inside' (Ferrante 2013a: 85 [Ferrante 2012b: 85]). Moreover, in a proleptic anticipation of her later disappearance/self-cancellation, the image also provides a metonymic portrayal of Lila's *smarginatura*, ultimately amounting to a form of self-erasure. As the narrator notes:

> With the black paper, with the green and purple circles that Lila drew around certain parts of her body, with the blood-red lines with which she sliced and said she was slicing it, she completed

her own self-destruction *in an image* […]. (Ferrante 2013a: 122-23 [Ferrante 2012b: 122]; emphasis in original)

The mutilated photo stands as one of the Neapolitan novels' central visual metaphors of resistance against male focalizations – and indeed objectifications – of the female body, which Ferrante refers to as the 'female automatons created by men' (Ferrante 2014a: 354 [Ferrante 2013b: 323]). Interestingly, resistance is articulated here in a metaphor of creation and self-mutilation or even self-cancellation (which includes – metaphorically – the 'destruction' of Lila's foetus). The joint creative process here ('the play of shared creation'; Ferrante 2013a: 122 [Ferrante 2012b: 122]) is clearly reminiscent of the act of writing and the agency that comes with authorship. Hence, it constitutes a self-conscious reflection on the narrative itself.

Picturing the maternal body: Sebold's visual narratives of absence

In Sebold's fiction, ekphrastic imagery of the female/maternal body provides an intimate insight into the mother-daughter relationship. *The Lovely Bones* features several photographic metatexts that – insofar as they prefigure the dissolution of the family unit after Susie's violent death – construe the 'domestic photograph [as] a symbol of disruption' (Bliss 2008: 861). This is most evident in a picture the protagonist has taken of her mother shortly before her death and which, as she only discovers retrospectively, captures a part of Abigail's personality that had apparently been repressed by her motherhood. The image not only defies the convention of the family photograph by depicting Abigail on her own, viewed from her daughter's perspective; this maternal portrayal also 'represents the fractured and damaged family' (Bliss 2008: 865), as it foreshadows the mother's abandonment of the family in the wake of Susie's death.

Another key motif linked to the strategic use of photographs in Sebold's texts is the notion of loss, which is particularly relevant in the context of the mother-daughter relationship. For her mother Abigail, for instance, Susie's old school photograph 'metaphorically replace[s] [her] unrecovered body' (Bliss 2008: 863). Whilst on the one hand the picture provides evidence of the photographic moment and therefore of Susie's existence, the viewer cannot recuperate the past moment captured in the photograph. Drawing on Barthes' notion of the split temporality and lack of a restorative function of the photograph, Bliss establishes a link between the photographic images of Susie and mourning: 'the photograph, like trauma, presents a gap, an absence, for the viewer – the viewer can never experience the moment of the photograph' (Bliss 2008: 871).

The equally prominent meta-photographic texts and visual narratives of the female/maternal body featured in *The Almost Moon* – which have as yet not received any critical attention – play a central role in portraying the text's fractured family narrative and the close links between the maternal and loss. In fact, the numerous photographs of Clair often stand as tokens of maternal absence that Helen seeks to process. Before resorting to the final matricidal act that reduces her mother to an abject corpse, Helen engages with a series of 'accessorial' devices in an attempt to gain some form of control over the evanescent maternal body. Most prominently, these include photographs of Clair as a young woman: as Helen gazes at the lifeless body of her parent, her mind wanders back to a series of 'framed black and whites of [her] mother in better times' (Sebold 2007: 16), when she still posed for the camera as a lingerie model. The monochrome colour scheme (only seemingly contradicted by Helen memorizing the colours of the garments her mother recalls wearing in them)

underlines the temporal lapse between the present and a distant past in which her mother's mind was not yet clouded by mental illness and self-loathing. The photographs of Clair's youthful body function as both metonymic signs of her absence and as traces of a happier time that Helen never took part in, but which she nonetheless seems to take some comfort in:

> In the photos of the rose-petal pink slip, she was still worthy of her own love, and it was this love for herself that [Helen] tried to take warmth from. […] Her smile was easy then, not forced, and the fear that could turn to bitterness had not tainted her eyes yet. (Sebold 2007: 16-7)

With the eroticized, 'muselike' (Sebold 2007: 123) maternal body positioned at the centre of the mother-daughter relationship, the prominent position which the photographs of Clair in 'outmoded support garments or diaphanous peekaboo gowns' (Sebold 2007: 66) occupy in the domestic sphere acts as further testimony to the central importance ascribed to the ideal of feminine beauty in the novel. The latter will prove deeply influential as Helen shapes her own feminine identity, ultimately embarking on a career that is – as was her mother's – built on the exhibition of the female body: 'Her brief life as a lingerie model before she met my father was one I'd envied growing up. Whatever else she was, she had been the most beautiful mother in the neighborhood, and watching her had taught me everything I knew about physical beauty.' (Sebold 2007: 13)

The physical beauty documented in *The Almost Moon*'s meta-photographic texts is, in fact, the connective tissue that links mother and daughter, with the 'postfeminist glamorization of beauty' (Whitney 2010: 364) clearly having some devastating effects on the protagonist. Clair not only blames her daughter for her lost

youth and freedom, but she also imposes a meticulous beauty regime on her that alienates Helen and leads her to treat her own body 'like a machine' (Sebold 2007: 149). The corporeal bond with her mother is so powerful that it shapes key parts of Helen's life: it underpins her profession as a live model, as well as becoming conflated with her lover's body during sex (Sebold 2007: 9; 71). Helen's and Clair's shared focus on their physical appearance, furthermore, continues to undermine their relationship, resulting in an ongoing rivalry between the two women that leaves the protagonist feeling deeply envious of her mother's 'natural', youthful beauty: 'whereas I felt my mother had possessed, throughout her life, true beauty, I had always believed that I lived on borrowed time' (Sebold 2007: 145). Despite Helen's sustained attempts at freeing herself from her mother (Sebold 2007: 84), a certain 'trope of the doppelganger' (Whitney 2010: 362) inextricably binds Clair to Helen. The two remain magnetically drawn to one another.

The physical decay of the maternal body, furthermore, goes hand in hand with the post-industrial decline that characterises the novel's suburban setting. Helen often ascribes maternal elements to the cityscape, as for instance when she visualises the chimneys of the Limerick nuclear towers as 'large white udders cut off and opening out like craters' (Sebold 2007: 81). Consequently, she establishes a direct link between the historical degeneration of the Pennsylvanian periphery and the pictures documenting her mother's body: 'What I knew, I think, without wanting to admit it, was that the photos were like historical documents of our town. They proved that long ago, there had been a more hopeful time' (Sebold 2007: 17).

Moreover, the Pennsylvanian suburb Helen grows up in appears to mirror her mother Clair's silent desperation. In fact, the whole neighbourhood, 'a place where daggers awaited behind every smiling face' (Sebold 2007: 155), harbours a pent-up

aggression that, in one scene, borders on sexual violence. After her mother witnesses a fatal accident involving a young boy and fails to call for help, the young Helen only narrowly escapes physical abuse as she is beleaguered by a male mob that seeks to punish Clair. As her parent progressively descends into mental illness and shuns any contact with the outside world, Helen compensates for Clair's absence by clinging to a series of maternal 'accessories' instead. In a desperate attempt to gain control over an always already lost affective bond, Helen re-establishes contact with Clair through the latter's youthful photographs:

> It was a small [photograph], 4x6, and in it she wore a slip with an ornate lace bodice. The ecru one. […] I walked over to the photograph and paused. I wanted to hurt her, but she was always crumbling and crying, barking and biting, *and to reach her seemed impossible to me*. I lifted it and traced the outline of her body with my finger. I slipped the frame into my jacket pocket […]. (Sebold 2007: 113; emphasis mine)

Running her fingers along the outline of the desired yet fleeting subject, the photographic document becomes a way of possessing part of her mother. For, as Sontag argues, the photograph contains a trace of the real, 'an extension of [the] subject; and [it is] a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it'. Treating it as a 'surrogate possession of a cherished person' (Sontag 1979: 155), Helen places the photograph into her jacket pocket in an attempt to appropriate a part of the central figure in her life that has proven recalcitrant and inaccessible in the past. *The Almost Moon*'s 'imagetexts' (Hirsch 1997: 5) of Clair's semi-nude, eroticized body stand as a 'pseudo-presence or token of absence' (Sontag 1979: 16), as well as serving to disrupt

a familiar, hegemonic narrative about motherhood and its representations, as briefly discussed above in relation to *The Lovely Bones*.

Fractured female bodies and the construction of selfhood in The Almost Moon

As her mother's sense of selfhood is principally constructed in pictures, Helen similarly seeks to establish her self-image through a series of visual narratives as she navigates a world that is littered with disrobed female bodies. These range from her mother's lingerie-clad photographs to Mr. Forrest's catalogue on *The Female Nude* (Sebold 2007: 123) and from the Japanese printmaker, Tanner Haku, modelling Helen on a series of Degas' colour plates (*Women dressing,* see Sebold 2007: 180) to the pornographic pictures in her father's secretly kept *Playboy* magazine (Sebold 2007: 201). Amongst this abundant imagery of the female body, Helen tries to position herself in a series of nude or semi-nude pictures: she is regularly at the mercy of the art school students whom she sits for, and also her husband Jake (himself an artist whom she met at college) uses her as one of his favourite nude models during the early stages of their relationship (Sebold 2007: 92). Helen in fact continues to assess her self-worth through how she is pictured in those images. Reminiscent of her mother's regret at her fading youth, she is devastated when Jake stops drawing her further into the relationship, turning his attention to making sculptures out of ice and dirt instead: 'You stopped drawing me. It killed me' (Sebold 2007: 166).

Some of the visual narratives in the novel provide a particularly insightful reflection on the protagonist's fragmented sense of selfhood. On the day of the murder, for instance, Helen pictures herself as a 'fetid human creature à la Lucian Freud' (Sebold 2007: 91). In stark contrast with her mother's hyper-feminized fashion

shoots, Helen identifies with the British painter's unembellished, crude and bulky nude portrayals of the human body.

Another picture of Helen that disavows a specific focus on her feminine features – and her proudest achievement yet (Sebold 2007: 261) – is a nude painting by the artist Julia Fusk that is exhibited in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Interestingly, the Fusk portrait reveals a *headless* 'dynamic torso that bled off the page' (Sebold 2007: 260-61), with a distinct focus on the mid-section of the body. The absence of the face (Sebold 2007: 145) seems to reflect the lack of individuation that emerges from the symbiotic mother-daughter bond. In its disjuncture, the painting is furthermore eerily reminiscent of the dismembered, 'legless, armless' trunks of the lost-wax Holocaust statues on her former therapist's desk, which appear to '[reach] out for [her]' (Sebold 2007: 227) whilst she is talking about her mother. The disturbing associations between the threatening countenance of the mutilated bodies on display, the atrocities of the Second World War and Clair only further reinforce Helen's violent struggle to achieve a unitary sense of selfhood in spite of her mother's looming presence.

Helen's final detachment from the mother goes hand in hand with Clair's physical decline, which further exposes the negative effects of the aging mother's body worship. Aware of losing her sexual allure, Clair starts covering all the mirrors in her home in cloths and hiding away in her domestic prison. However, it is only by committing murder that Helen can finally let go of her mother and her morbid pursuit of an ideal of feminine beauty that aims at male consumption. After Clair's death, Helen finally comes to the realization that her mother 'had made a living striking poses at the instruction of others' (Sebold 2007: 260; see also 90). The symbolic cutting of her mother's long silver braid – one of Clair's most prized possessions and

an enduring token of femininity – signals an end to Helen's years of compliance to her mother. In death, at last, the mother loosens her grip, with her all-encompassing existence '[ending] at the border of her own flesh' (Sebold 2007: 19) and her becoming compliant like 'a life-sized doll': 'To have controlled her as easy as that, impossible' (Sebold 2007: 9).

With the maternal body succumbing to illness and senility, the protagonist-narrator's desire turns into repulsion as she confronts Clair's abject physicality. The presence of bodily fluids and the corpse (with her mother described as 'a passed out bag of bones that reeked of shit'; Sebold 2007: 11) further reinforces the link with a Kristevan form of abjection that culminates in a symbolic form of matricide that involves a psychic separation from the mother.[7] According to this interpretation it is only through 'murder', in Sebold's narrative executed both literally and metaphorically, that the protagonist achieves a release that allows her to conceive a life outside the spectre of maternal and bodily entrapment. After struggling with her own mental issues (Sebold 2007: 275), erratic behaviour and suicidal thoughts, the protagonist finally achieves some form of resolution as she prepares to take responsibility for her actions in the last scene of the novel.

Conclusion

[7] As Kristeva argues, bodily substances like urine, excrement, vomit or blood challenge the alleged borders of selfhood by crossing the boundary between the outside and the inside of the body, with the corpse representing the 'utmost of abjection' in its constituting a border that has 'encroached upon everything' (Kristeva 1982: 3-4). In her threshold position between symbiotic fusion (in pregnancy) and the first encounter with the other in birth, the mother assumes a similar 'in-between' status that both threatens and guarantees the independent notion of selfhood (Kristeva 1982: 32). See also note 6.

In their exploration of the 'dark sides' of motherhood and daughterhood, Ferrante and Sebold dare to thematize the darkest emotional and psychic depths of this most intimate of female bonds, thereby addressing a gap in the dominant narrative of Western European cultural history. By transcending the cultural and social norms often associated with motherhood – and its disruptive couplings with gendered violence, disease and animosity in particular – both authors make powerful statements about the history of colonization of the female body in a society that has long been dominated by men and crucially focalized by the male gaze. As Cavarero has shown in *Horrorism,* the role of the perpetrator has been almost exclusively assumed by men in our cultural imaginary, and there remains a specific poignancy in the association between women – and mothers in particular – and forms of violence or transgression (Cavarero 2009: 26).

Seizing precisely on the subversive power of the link between motherhood and forms of animosity, this article has shown how Ferrante's and Sebold's narrative employs the maternal trope to problematize maternity – and femininity more broadly – as normative, transparent categories. Moreover, a comparative analysis of their work reveals how Ferrante and Sebold's strategic use of ekphrastic imagery draws attention to, disrupts and ultimately refocalizes the visual narrative of the maternal/feminine body, with its long history of objectification. Despite the obvious differences in external chronologies and the socio-historical context, Ferrante's and Sebold's texts provide first-person perspectives of the emergence of female subjectivities in a peripheral modern cityscape[8] – an intrinsically liminal space – that is directly filtered through the maternal body. Both authors' narratives focus on motherhood as a threshold space – as a trope that, in its ability to procreate, disturbs

[8] For a fascinating discussion of Naples as a 'hermaphrodite' city, see de Rogatis 2015, esp. 291.

the binary demarcation of inside/outside, self/other. Ultimately, Ferrante and Sebold employ the concept of liminality in their texts to interrogate a series of margins as their protagonists destabilize established discourses of motherhood and femininity to underscore the complex constitution of the feminine subject.

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