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The Fistful of Flies: A Feminist Hyphenated Disruption and Transformation of Biopolitical Interpellation

Lara Palombo

'Fistful of Flies' (1997), a film written and directed by Monica Pellizzari, is a rare, feminist intercultural intervention of Italian-Australian daughter/mother relations. This paper argues that this film participates in the disruption and transformation of the violent insular imaginary that has shaped the embodiment of Italian-Australian diasporic women cinematically and culturally. The surreal, black comedy is shown to enact a transmuted genre, that sets up grotesque images that are at times disturbingly raw and carry a sense of violent and struggling lives. The film sets up mother-daughter relations across three generations as being produced in this case by the women's varying relations with the territorialisation of transnational, diasporic communal/s and complicity with state biopolitical interpellation in the construction of an insular Nation. Finally, the reading of the cinematic materialisation of struggling bodies also shows that this is signified by the racial grotesque, a site of (self) reflectivity, disruption and transformation that creates chaos and failure to enter racial, ethnicised sexual embodiments. This does not create a complete transformation of the characters and mother-daughter relations but initiates possibilities based on the release of violence.

Keywords: Diasporic Cinema; Feminist Cinema; Italian-Australian; Biopolitics; Racialised Sexuality; Transnationalism

Diasporic imaginaries can be disruptive as well as transformative. Situated within the hierarchy of a racialised heteronormative order of the nation-state and the diverse

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politics of Indigenous, non-Indigenous, diasporic and transnational communal/s, the possibility to transform the terrains of cultural historical imaginaries is always political and hard fought. *Fistful of Flies* (1997) is a film written and directed by Monica Pellizzari towards the end of the twentieth century that remains a rare,¹ feminist intercultural cinematic embodiment of Italian-Australian daughter/mother relations. Set in a non-specific time, it draws from diasporic women's narratives that Pellizzari heard when growing up and through her work with women exposed to violence. In this film, the desire to (self) represent is sustained by a commitment to disrupt and transform the violence embedded in racial and ethnicised sexual embodiments as they are materialised,² that is visualised, rendered audible and sensed cinematically and lived intergenerationally by Italian-Australian diasporic women.

Fistful of Flies is a black comedy that centres on the 16-year-old Mars, the daughter of conservative Catholic Italian family (Grace and Joe Lupi) who tries to conduct her life, sexuality, through surveillance and by planning to marry her. The teenager symbolically rejects the (Catholic) sanctity of her name Maria, by identifying herself as Mars, the name of the Roman god of war. This becomes a reference to Mars' life being locked in ongoing and violent struggle against diasporic normative values. This character is often framed in conflict with her Catholic mother Grace who identifies herself as a white, superior, Northern Italian. Grace is torn but also complicit with her Southern Italian and philandering husband Joe, in the enactment of violence within domestic spatial arrangements. This includes repeated threats and actual physical beatings, a forced bath and scrubbing of the body to purify Mars' sexual desires and even a brisk inspections of the shades of her skin colour to control her 'whiteness'. Mars, however, spurns this imagined future and attempts suicide. She is characterised as being more interested in becoming a lawyer and has the support of her grandmother Nonna Norma who clashes with her daughter Grace's values and in fragmented recounts moments of violence endured during her heterosexual marriage. Norma is now living with another woman, thus alluding (without categorising it) to a lesbian relationship and to a cinematic queering of the religious heteronorms of the diasporic family unit. The film ends with Grace, Mars and Norma re-connecting with one another and finding strength to end the ongoing³ conflicts and violence in their lives.

Fistful of Flies was well acknowledged overseas⁴ but was not a successful Australian national story. The circulation and availability of this film in the Australian public domain remains negligible and is not available in local film stores.⁵ Whilst it received mixed reports nationally, the film has not gone unnoticed. This paper proposes a reading of the film as a feminist, hyphenated commitment to disrupt and transform violent, racial and ethnicised sexual embodiments as they are lived socially and produced cinematographically. The film offers (self)reflective moments on the normative power of diasporic and transnational imaginaries and the ways these are also guided by biopolitical relations that evoke the 'insular imaginary' of Australia. This surreal, black comedy enacts a transmuted genre, that sets up grotesque images that are at times disturbingly raw and carry a sense of struggling diasporic

women's bodies that resonates with the director's autobiographical proclamation in the early 90's 'I was born a woman, a wog and a westie, the three worst things you could be in Australia' (Pellizzari 1993: 134; Sydney Sunday Telegraph 1998). In the initial part of the paper, I enter into an existing discussion on the symbolic and metaphorical significance of the flies (see Senzani 2008). I propose a reading that focuses on the ways the film through the 'haunting presence of flies' deals with the politics of visibility that embodies diasporic women. By engaging with Rey Chow's (2007) work on cinematic visibility, I argue that the flies constitute a form of acknowledgement of the multiple and varied political relations that shape differently the three generations of diasporic women's and their relationships. They frame that which can be sensed and not seen and that regulates, terrorises, resists but also creates possibilities by disrupting and transforming the disciplinary order/s. In this critical analysis, the flies frame the daughter-mother relations not in pre-given, genetic or filiative terms but as a site that is produced culturally through violence and that can also be disruptive and transformative.

Revisiting Pellizzari's intercultural engagement with national and transnational Italian and Australian cinematic traditions and practices, Senzani (2008) argues that this surreal, black comedy produces a 'transmuted' genre that parodies, disrupts and resignifies the ways these traditions have embodied Italian-Australian women. This paper draws and extends recent feminist discussions of this *Fistful of Flies*, to argue that its comedic, transmuted genre and grotesque style mock and scorn the ruins of a neo-colonial domain that has created what Suvendrini Perera (2009) calls an 'Insular Imagination' that territorialises Australia as a transnational, white nation (or more precisely as an island-nation). In brief, Perera in her book, *Australia and the Insular Imagination*, argues that Australia is part of processes of western territorial ordering and imaginary, a product of technologies of territorialisation as well as constitutive of them, that have envisioned it as an insular Island-nation, a conjunction of 'sea, land, nation and the spaces between' with particular claims to racial-geographical exceptionalism (2009: 11, 22). This continues to produce a geo-body of 'shifting coastlines and watery foundations' that displace existing geographies, configure and shape an (ideological) Insularity and the sense of a compact, singular, white Australian nationalist imaginary (2009: 22). The insularity of the island-nation is constitutive of, as well as being produced by, *terra nullius* and elevation of internal and external borders that target racialised and ethnicised populations⁶ including asylum seekers, the Cronulla riots, hierarchical distinction from Islands in the Asian continent that is paralleled by a process of ontological and racial differentiation and more. I draw from Perera's notion of an 'Insular Imaginary' that is increasingly difficult to sustain (2009: 31), to argue that this is exerted within the everyday relations that constitute the diasporic family unit and include (bio)political normative repertoires that are available to the state and are directed at populations. In this film, the re-establishment of the white, religious, heteronormative diasporic family unit is shown to be constituted by, and constitutive of, a transnational insular imagination. The usage of grotesque scenes sets up raw images that are disturbing and hard to watch and

embrace a sense of struggling women's embodiments. I argue, that they are a refusal to join the creation of a 'compact' white diasporic 'communal' that is formed by the elevation of racial and ethnicised (including ethno-religious), sexual borders. In *Fistful of Flies*, the violence occurring within the diasporic, white heteronormative family unit, acts as a direct intervention on the embodiment of racial and ethnicised heteronormative borders. This violence is shown to bridge normative practices with transgressive diasporic women's bodies and reconfigures the insular imaginary.

In the final section of the paper, I produce a reading of the film as a cinematic critique of what Balibar calls the 'fictive logic' of a coherent ethnic heteronormative family unit. I argue that the film responds to the biopolitics of the state that produces racial and ethnicised forms of sexuality. By drawing from Rey Chow's (2002) argument on the way 'self-referentiality' can operate within the biopolitics of the modern state, I argue that the film explores the ways the creation of an 'ethnic confessional' becomes part of technologies that work to produce a biopolitical racial and ethnicised national order. In this analysis, Chow's discussion of the biopolitical is derived from Foucault's notion of modern political order being based on the ascendancy of life over death and the systematic management or ordering of biological life and its reproduction (2002: 3–7). For Chow, in agreement with Ann Stoler (1995), the Eurocentric history of biopower that Foucault produced by writing on the normalisation of the sexual order is not clearly distinguishable from the violent reproduction of human life that in modern times is always racially and ethnically inflected. Sexuality is coterminus with race and ethnicity (2002: 9). In this sense, for Chow, the normalising state biopolitical technologies are not distinguishable from race, racism and ethnicity which are understood as fragmenting the biological field, create and appeal to racial but also ethnic hierarchies (Stoler cited in Chow 2002: 9–11, 29). Drawing from Chow's discussion of the biopolitical order, I argue that the film's visual materialisation of corporeal and sensory responses by introducing fragmented skin based narratives that embody filiative racial connections operate as responses to biopolitical interpellation and appeal to (self)ethnicisation. These fragmented narratives within the film disclose how Italian-Australian diasporic women and men conduct forms of (self)surveillance that encourages their embodiment of a racialised and ethnicised sexual hierarchy that has historically privileged the 'Insular Imagination' of Australia. Finally, I argue that the film critically enacts a racial grotesque that produces moments of 'failure' to categorise diasporic subjects so as to disrupt the biopolitical attempt to naturalise the racialised, ethnicised sexual embodiments informing diasporic women's order.

The film was drawn from various women's recounts of their lives and works to disrupt and transform the violent order informing their lives. The very title *Fistful of Flies* is based on the translation of the Italian saying 'Un pugno di Mosche', a saying that is often directed at women, to control their lives. Pellizzari points to the link between the title and the theme of the film:

[It] means that if you follow your spirit you'll end up with a fistful of flies, a fistful of nothing – because you can't catch flies. It expresses the view that a woman's path is created for her and she should not stray from it. (in Petraccone 2000: 3)

In this case, the film disrupts and transforms the logic of this transnational and diasporic saying that guides women's lives. The repeated references to the 'flies' throughout the diegetic and non-diegetic audio and images connect to the transnational and transformative knowledge that inform women's lives. Senzani (2008) argues that through the flies, Pellizzari pays homage to French surrealist filmmaker Buñuel, who often used insect imagery as 'anti-church blasphemy' (2008: 240). Buñuel offered selected metaphorical images such as ants that refer to general themes of death, eros, and metamorphosis (Iampolski, 1998: 190). The flies are tied to a metaphorical function of representing Mars's ongoing abjection and defiance that, like the flies, returns throughout the film (2008: 240). The transformation of the Italian saying only occurs when Mars is finally re-connected to both her mother Grace who rejects Joe's values and Nonna Norma who returns to Grace's house with her lover. Only then, we see a naked Mars in a forest letting free the flies in her fist 'thereby re-signifying the disparaging Italian proverb of the title' (2008: 241).

Without seemingly wanting to deny the importance of acknowledging Mars or younger generation diasporic women's capacity to bring changes in mother/daughter relations, the existing and current analysis of the flies is limited in its acknowledgement of the varied forms of everyday and violent relations of power that guide Norma and Grace's lives. The focus on the mother/daughter relationship across the three generations of women, in Maitra's words, is impinged upon and shaped by varying forms of racial and sexual otherness (Maitra 2010: 144). So for me, the flies constitute a form of acknowledgement of the multiple and varied political relations that shape diasporic women's lives including Mars's. In this sense, I want to re-focus the reading of Luis Buñuel's metaphors that is focused on Mars's capacity to produce 'liberation'. Ibarz in his recent discussion of Buñuel's work notes that metaphors become a 'moral metaphor, a new type of political action' (2004: 31: 3) that articulates the socio-historical conditions that shape women's lives and daily order. Borrowing from Rey Chow's discussion of becoming visible and the politics of identification, this film through the 'flies' produces an entrance into a different frame of visibility that articulates and transforms insular imaginaries, as quoted:

[...] This [...] makes it possible to include that which has hitherto remained invisible and thereby to reinvent the very terms of the relation between the visible and the invisible. In this process, however, becoming visible is no longer simply a matter of becoming visible in the visual sense...but also of participating in a discursive politics of (re)configuring the relation between center and margins, a politics in which what is visible may be key but not the exclusive determinant. There is, in other words, a visibility of visibility- a visibility that is the condition of possibility for what becomes visible, that may derive certain intelligibility from the latter but cannot be simply reduced to it. (2007: 11)

In this sense, the flies are the metaphor for the (visible) traces of the 'condition' that mark the visibility of Italo-Australian women lives but that cannot be simply reduced to what is made visible. So they also participate in a process of (self)reflection on the new connections and possibilities and participate in the consideration of the

discursive politics that ‘propels, enhances, or obstructs [this] visibility in the first place’ (Chow 2007: 12). In their multiplicity, the flies in this film are a disturbance that is heard but not always seen. They are sensed and at times become visible extensions of the characters’ bodies materialised in the film through shots of them lying on the body, discolouring it and, as Senzani also notes, by being eaten by Mars and therefore becoming injected inside the body (2008: 240). The flies as I will discuss further on in the paper are also killed or squashed by Joe as they produce an affective response of disgust and fear, while Grace works to remove traces of their presence from the skin.

Fistful of Flies begins with what will become in Capp’s words the ‘haunting’ presence of the sound of buzzing flies (2003: 248). This sound is juxtaposed over the running credits of the film until this cuts into a series of short and surreal mid to close up shots of Mars as a young girl observing flies on her hand and then gazing directly at two dogs that are mating. Grace stops driving her tractor and through an Italo-Australian bi-lingualism, scolds Mars for staring at the dogs and after covering her vision, she shouts in English: ‘Filthy Child! [...] You will end up with a fistful of flies, a fistful of nothing’. Nonna Norma, who hears the shouting while washing the dishes, runs out of the house and asks Grace to stop shouting. This focus on the three women’s activities and their gaze creates traces of an assemblage produced by the localised, ‘hyphenated’ context of mother/daughter relations across three generations of women, so as to introduce a sense of the order of life or the understanding of the way women’s lives have been ‘conducted’. Land, work, play, sex, fighting, family, living as Italian-Australians are a visible part of these women’s daily order of living and their relations. Yet, these women have a different relation to this order.

This incredibly detailed scene is introduced by the impelling metaphor of watching the flies but also of being watched by the flies, hearing their buzzing noises and the embodied enunciation of the diasporic meaning of *Fistful of Flies*. The ‘flies’, through diegetic and non-diegetic audio-visual emphasis, in effect expand the ‘epistemic sense of visibility’ or the ‘structuration of knowability’ (Chow 2007: 11). The saying itself, in this scene, then becomes an embodied form of knowledge that governs Italo-Australian women, as it regulates their daily ‘order’. Mother/daughter relation(s) are (bio)regulated by Grace’s recourse to the fearful but also terrorising metaphorical images of ‘loss’ and ‘nothingness’ produced through the saying of ‘fistful of flies’ itself. Grace is terrified by the meanings of the say of the *Fistful of Flies*. Nonna Norma does not participate in the terrorising order conducted by the fear of the flies and asks Grace to relinquish it and not to re-create it through Mars. In fact, Nonna throughout the film not only disregards the haunting presence of the flies but also discloses her embodied knowledge of the violent effects created by the imaginary of the ‘fistful of the flies’. Mars, however, is intrigued by their presence on her body and is not afraid of them. In this scene, however, Grace and Nonna Norma, both attempt to mediate her understanding of the flies. In this sense, then, the flies are symbolic metaphors for that which is always present but also experienced differently, historically and across the three generations of women. The flies become symbolic

of a cinematographic attempt to foreground traces of that which regulates, terrorises, resists and creates possibilities by disrupting the disciplinary order/s. The flies in this sense espouse that which is lived differently and it is heard and sensed, but also ignored and rejected, reflected upon and that cannot always be seen. This allows the film to consider the daughter-mother relation not through pre-given, genetic or filiative terms that naturalises the order of these women's lives and their relations to one another but rather this is set from the very beginning of the film as being forcefully and culturally constituted including through fear, violence but also by the creation of disruption and transformation.

Rose Capp has positioned this comedic work of Pellizzari with a national cinematic tradition of 'unruly women' represented in the films of other Australian feminist filmmakers including Jane Champion (2003: 250). Its genre is discussed as a surrealist 'black comedy' that through 'satire and unabashed grotesquerie' creates unruly Italian-Australian women and 'a form of visual, textual and political disruption' and 'assertive sexuality that resist suppression' (2003: 250). Collins also comments that the film narrative re-focuses mother-daughter relations through the usage of a grotesque comedy that is based on Bakhtin's carnivalesque caricatures and imageries of ambivalent bodies that evoke themes of death and re-birth to respond to melodramatic attitudes to sexuality and self-sacrifice (Collins 2003: 174). In this context, *Fistful of Flies* is defined by Collins as a feminist assault on the power of the father figure. Joe Lupi is publicly humiliated by his wife Grace and armed daughter Mars on the main street of the town. Grace confronts him and lifts her skirt up and flashes her 'onion' to the onlookers in the street while Mars holds him at gun-point wearing her mother's wedding dress. They both force him to relinquish the black leather belt around his pants that was used in the privacy of the home to lash Mars and threaten Grace. This scene, amongst others, is viewed as creating 'the rebirth of the mother' in that in the film, mother-daughter relations become a site of political unity and changes. Also, for Collins this film creates 'hope for a different future for Italian-Australian masculinity' through the young boy who was set to marry Mars. (Collins 2003: 177) This sexual re-alignment participates in the creation of Italian-Australian 'unruly women' that re-shape national filmic practices that have excluded diasporic women voices.

This early feminist reading of the film genre is partly re-focused by Senzani's recent comparative study (see 2008, 2011). In her analysis, Senzani discusses Pellizzari's work in conjunction with that of filmmakers Tracy Moffat and Carla Lawson and re-locates this specific film within what Hamid Naficy calls 'accented' films' that introduce 'hybrid and peripheral perspectives' to 'point out the contradictions in dominant discourses as they relate to (neo)colonial, racist, globalised, patriarchal, past and present' (Senzani 2008: 1). Pellizzari's work is understood as a politicised, feminist and hyphenated form of 'critical humour' that unsettles particular formations of identity concerning Italian-Australian women so to explore issues of women's sexuality, unveiling and challenging the masculinist and heteronormative discourses that dominate her Italian/Australian community – both in terms of representation and

socialisation (2008: 12). Thus, the sexual politics of Italo-Australian community is defined as the effects of dominant discursive formations operating at the local, national and transnational level rather than as a pre-existing and primordial ethnic politics that represses sexuality.

Senzani argues that *Fistful of Flies* is a black comedy that produces a generic transmutation. Its creation of quick movements through camera work and by entering an array of Italian and Australian cinematic styles and traditions of genres including melodrama, grotesque comedy, neorealist aesthetics, Italian folk and blasphemous humour in ways that:

[...] effectively creolizes Australian national cinema with an Italian accent and [its] tradition of [blasphemous] humor, while carnivalizing Italian patriarchy and male gaze with an irreverent, feminist laughter unequivocally arising from the 'freakish' tradition down under [i.e. from Australia]. (2008: 319)

The transmuted genres in *Fistful of Flies* respond and work to re-define Australian local and Italian national but also global cinematic representations that historically have shaped the embodiment of Italo-Australian women. Senzani, in agreement with Collins and Capp, sees the grotesque as a key feature of the transmuted genre, but this is seen as an hyphenated link to Italian blasphemous humour and Commedia Dell'Arte that had also inspired Fellini's movies:

With *Fistful of Flies*, Pellizzari's relation to the grotesque also becomes more prominent... Influenced by Fellini and Italian cinema, Pellizzari's humor is... steeped in Italian folk, and often grotesquely humorous traditions, which also peppered Pirandello's novelle and surfaced in the 'loud, histrionic Italian comedies of the 1960s. (2008: 270)

In this sense, Pellizzari's grotesque is perceived as a hyphenated feminist, blasphemous humour that ridicules diasporic masculinist and heteronormative religious institutions and the globalised 'patriarchy [...] that Fellini powerfully represented' (Senzani 2008: 138). In this film, the cross-cuts between the scene of Mars's naked dancing and masturbation in her bedroom and the exterior aerial scene of a religious ceremony, where the statue of the Madonna is being flown by an helicopter and air-dropped on a marble stall in the cemetery as been discussed a parody of the flying Christ that introduces *La Dolce Vita* (Farmer 1994; Senzani 2008: 324). I would add that this parody positions the film within the ruins of a neo-colonial domain that creates what Perera calls an 'Insular Imagination'. The spatialisation and formation of a diasporic communal and rituals in effect shore up *terra nullius* and the territorialisation of the meanings of *country* that negate and 'effac[e] First Nation people geographies and disallows competing cosmographies' and spiritualities (Perera 2009: 22). This ground or the 'terra' (Perera 2009: 2) is imagined here as being appropriated by transnational diasporic values or as an Italian-Australian diasporic Catholic cemetery and place of worship that configure the 'compactness' of the white, religious, heteronormative diasporic family unit and values. The values, I will discuss further on, are still subjected to the forceful biopolitical interpellation of the state that enforces compliance and self-surveillance. In this scene however, this

compactness, as the chipping of the flying Madonna and the struggle to place it on the marble stall signifies, is struggling and hard to territorialise and hold together. A theme that is evoked again in the film by the introduction of a local Aboriginal female doctor who enters the diasporic home and whose knowledge opposes and works to transform the logic of a diasporic insular imaginary that guides Mars and Grace. Mars and Nonna Norma are also absent and not participating in these rituals and become part of the struggle, refusal and queering of this compactness.

The film is visually marking the formation of the diasporic, communal as being based on a violent opposition to Mars's sexual acts. The opposition created by the visualisation of the two contrasting events (i.e. the religious function contrasted by Mars's masturbation) becomes the site of a feminist hyphenated refusal of elevating the borders that sustain a diasporic insular imaginary. The use of physical violence by Joe after their return from the religious ceremony, and that is visibly supported, sensed and heard from another room by Grace and her neighbour, becomes the bridge between the religious ruins and the perceived transgressive sexualised body of Mars that acts as a direct and violent intervention on the embodiment of ethnicised heteronorms. A violence that as the film progresses we are told was also lived by Nonna Norma during her heterosexual marriage and that is rejected and disrupted in the film by the materialisation of an unspecified (i.e. not categorised) queer relationship with a woman. And again, this is a violence that the local Aboriginal doctor challenges.

The grotesque in this film in effect becomes intrinsic to the representation of a neo-colonial setting that is shaped by varying forms of racial and sexual otherness. If the grotesque is part of the film's generic transmutation, then one can also argue that its signification changes across scenes in ways that materialise cinematographically a racial grotesque: disrupting the normalisation of a bio-political interpellation and opening up transformative connections. The earlier critiques of the film by Capp (2003), Collins (2003) and Senzani (2008, 2011) acknowledge the racial and ethnic politics operating in this film. They do not, however, engage in a close reading of the ways the grotesque in this film becomes part of an interrogation of raciality and self-ethnicisation. Capp and Collins readings of the film as working to liberate a repressed sexuality, re-asserts what Balibar calls 'the fictive' logic of a coherent 'ethnic unit' or the cohesiveness of an ethnic patriarchal Catholic family, and its sexual repressive practices against diasporic women without questioning the role of the state in the production of ethnicised forms of sexuality (Balibar 2002: 96). Senzani's analysis has placed greater attention to the neo-colonial position of Australia and the ways the state has racialised and questioned the whiteness of diasporic women. This film is seen as evoking the north/south divide and as representing Mars as struggling with her whiteness (see Senzani 2008, 2011). How this film engages with the state involvement in racial and ethnicised sexual relations remains unclear in these analyses. By drawing upon Rey Chow's argument about cross-cultural representation and 'self-referentiality' within the biopolitics of the modern state, I suggest in the rest of this paper that this film registers biopolitical forms of interpellation that

reconfigure diasporic women's lives in the racialised and ethnicised sexual order of the 'insular' nation. I propose that *Fistful of Flies* is framed by the creation of a racial grotesque (Gillespie 2007) that enacts a struggling body that refuses and disrupts biopolitical interpellation and processes of normalisation.

Italian-Australian women's negotiations with diasporic and transnational relations are also always connected to the complex map of the nation. Rey Chow argues that the act, of speaking about oneself is one that is connected to state based processes of biopolitical interpellation as opposed to being an 'unmediated' act of reaching 'inner truth' (Chow 2002: 113). In agreement with Foucault's (1998) concern with the repressive hypothesis of sexuality, Chow argues that 'ethnicity' is also perceived as a kind of 'truth' that awaits liberation through the process of Confession (i.e. via biography, autobiographies, storytelling) and we can add film-making, so to redeem that part of us that has not come to light. These cultural productions become a means for re-imagining the self as a refuge beyond the reach of power (114). But the confessional becomes also another space for complicity with state based, biopolitical relations that construct the nation as a unified body:

[...] when minority individuals think that, by referring to themselves, they are liberating themselves from powers that subordinates them, they may actually be allowing such powers to work in the most intimate fashion...fully complicit with the guilty verdict that has been declared on them socially long before they speak. (Chow 2002: 115)

In this film the exploration of the confessional mode starts with complicit and fragmented narratives that disclose how diasporic women and men conduct forms of (self)surveillance that benefit the insular nation. Fragmented memories are materialised in the film by visualising the corporeal and sensory responses to racialisation and by the uttering of skin based narratives that embody filiative, racial connections.

The close up of Joe's fearful look as he carefully inspects the number of darker spots on Mars face is followed by his abrupt and violent move of squashing the flies lying on the domestic walls, believed pertinent, responsible for the 'darkening' of his and Mars' skin. This sequence is framed by Grace' disclosing comment that Mars 'has a bit of mongrel in her' due to Joe's perceived dubious racial filiations or impure genetic roots. This utterance gestures to his Southern background and absolves the 'flie' from any wrong doing. Grace is quick to recall that in contrast to Joe, she is 'white as mountain snow' as she is from true 'polenta eaters, Northerners' (also cited in Senzani 2008: 426 footnote). This is an ugly and grotesque scene that enacts and demands a physical response, intervention on the body, and thus guides the re-ordering of diasporic lives. Joe's fear and surveillance of the body, his squashing of the flies and Grace's self-congratulatory narrative are part of a black comedy that does not offer a sentimental attachment to history and memory. In Chow's words they are:

[...] not simply a matter of respecting one's biological or cultural elders but also an old age moral apparatus for interpellating individuals into the hierarchy-conscious conduct of identifying with- and submitting to- whatever preexists them- from the ancestral family to the ancestral land...and the ethnic community in a foreign nation- as authoritative and thus beyond challenge. (Chow 2007: 263)

In this instance the bodies of Mars, Joe and Grace are shown as confessional sites that respond to state based biopolitical interpellation/s, by actualising an order of knowledge/s that demands their investment in hegemonic forms of heteronormative whiteness⁷ and the removal of any signs of impurity. This is a raw, crude and violent form of (self) 'disclosure' that as Pugliese warns:

[...] participates in the violence of a subordinating relation: the face of the other is dismissed precisely as [diasporic subject] is made to turn... into an object that makes itself available for the production of raced-knowledge. (2002: 162)

The knowledge produced in this sequence inferiorises Joe and Mars and entraps Grace to a racialised and ethnicised sexual order.

By evoking a (self)identification with the north/south divide and white heteronormative values instituted by the Australian nation-state the film works to materialise cinematically the biopolitical interpellation that reconfigures the insular imaginary. The infusion of the a priori transnational and diasporic knowledge on the violence that had marked the very constitution of the Italian nation-state⁸ with the assimilative national hierarchical order set out by the White Australia policy⁹ is reconfigured by Grace's skin narrative. This is a moment marked by the presence of the buzzing flies that becomes a meta-reference to national, Indigenous, transnational and diasporic knowledge and memories that embody and guide differently the characters of this film. But it is also based on the constant of negotiating a racial hierarchy and (self)ethnicisation, that positions Northern European women within the roles of protecting and reproducing the white heteronormative family unit and differentiates these migrants from those of the Southern regions (especially from Calabria and Sicily), Southern Europeans, non-Europeans and most importantly First Nation people.¹⁰ In this national hierarchisation that is informed by diasporic and transnational, the classification of Northern and Southern Italian people is shown to be guided by forms of scrutiny carried out here by Grace's disclosure of Joes' impure white masculinity but also by Joe's action of verifying Mars's whiteness by inspecting her skin colour and by his abrupt squashing of the flies. These acts become recitations of a symbolic fear of embodying and reproducing what is constituted as a racial, ethnicised filiative impurity. These varied diasporic gestures are evocative of the translocation of the north/south divide in a diasporic context and its immersion in the biopolitical realm of the Australian nation-state that, until the mid-1960s performed intensive physical examinations before granting Southern migrants the right to live in Australia and continually condoned the questioning of their ability to reproduce white children, their rights to work, political affiliations, values and morals (see Pugliese 2002; Palombo 2010).

This film does not simply reproduce white, ethnicised heteronormative bodies. *Fistful of Flies* enacts a racial grotesque that undermines the biopolitical imperative to interpellate and entrap diasporic subjects in a racial heteronormative hierarchy. This film enacts cinematographically what Cassuto (1997) and Gillespie (2007) call a 'racial grotesque' that disturbs the reproduction of the bio-political order by de-naturalising the embodiment of enmeshed national and transnational categorizations.

In brief, Cassuto's thesis is that American literature and cultural imaginaries historically have been marked by a tension whereby racial objectification is never fully completed. Caught in the process of becoming either the 'human or the non-human', the racial subject is not completely transformed by the objectifying gaze and remains in a state of flux, in-between as the racial grotesque (Cassuto, 1997: xv). For Cassuto, the racial grotesque is inevitable but also an intrusion to the (white) dominant desired world, a 'disruption' of the 'neat categories' as he argues this is felt in the form of anomalies that bridge categories and resist integration. It consequently questions the basis on which knowledge rests [...] (1997: ix). Gillespie in his more recent reading of the film *Coonskin* (2007, 2012: 67) infuses the disruptiveness of the racial grotesque envisaged by Cassuto with the duality conceived by both Bakhtin's grotesque body¹¹ and a Du Boisian sense of the veil and double consciousness embodied by the 'one dark body'. This reading points out the way the film *Coonskin* through its character Tom creates a 'body double inhabited and struggling with itself' (2007: 31), that is, the embodiment of the racial grotesque. Gillespie shows that the film strategically instigates from within the space of the racial grotesque, a 'semic crisis' or chaos that brings disruption to the regime of truth and knowledge propagated by hegemonic whiteness (2007: 43). I would argue that *Fistful of Flies* also creates the 'racial grotesque' to instigate disruption and failure to reproduce the Insular Imaginary. This embodies the racial grotesque through diasporic bodies at the cusp of biopolitical rebirth that are shown to be struggling within themselves and as failing to enter the normative categories.

This film in selected scenes disrupts the biopolitical imperative to interpellate and entrap diasporic women in participating in the configuration of a white, racial hierarchy. This film enacts varied attempts and 'failures' to embody hegemonic categories. What must be noted here is that whiteness as Pugliese as also argued, does not stand as single, fixed, racial biological marker as:

[...] whiteness is not a racial category that necessarily inscribes or colours the body en bloc, as a type of totalising or homogenous thing-in-itself. Rather, its historically contingent ethnic variations and its necessarily semiotic status generate the possibility for it to be denied topically—in the context of systems of differential, and often contradictory, relations that may incorporate a singular body. (Pugliese 2002: 154)

In line with this argument, Pugliese has also well documented the way the Australian Immigration Department until the 1960s, often failed to apply 'whiteness' as a form of measure to racially categorise migrants from the Italian Southern regions. He argues that there was a:

[...] failure of categorical definitions of whiteness to offer immediately recognisable 'types,' with the consequent anxiety that a certain class of prospective migrants, of indeterminate racial status, could possibly *pass as* whites when they were in fact Black. (Pugliese 2002: 158)

Fistful of Flies reproduces this repeated 'failure of categorising' through figures like Joe and Mars that are shown to struggle within themselves and fail in their

reproduction of racial categorical definitions and (self)ethnicisation. They are represented as the racial grotesque that for Gillespie become ‘the irresolute antinomy of the human and non-human’ (2007: 31) a distinction well known to have been enforced by racial ordering and that as I would argue is rejected by this film. For Gillespie, this failure to be categorised as white becomes the racial grotesque:

[...] [that] can be thought of as an agent of chaos, a contestation of the regimes of truth and knowledge propagated by the anti-black hegemony of whiteness. (Gillespie 2007: 31)

The film materialises cinematographically a racial grotesque that fails the ‘biopolitical order’. A sequence of unrelated scenes, encompass short cuts of the daily processes of (self)racial purification that involve Grace manually bursting open and stripping the black spots from Joe’s back. Similarly, Mars ‘last desperate measure to whiten her skin and corneas with lemon juice squeezed in her eyes and rubbed on her face’ (Senzani 2011: 239). I argue that these scenes act as the racial grotesque that enact the categorical struggle to embody whiteness and as such become signs of a ‘racialised instability’ that disturbs the naturalisation of the (white) heteronormative, biopolitical order and (self)ethnicisation. Furthermore, it is important to remember here that Grace’s racial filiative relations are not producing an idealised white diasporic heteronormative family unit. Not only are these relations effectively embodied in the film as positioning Grace in violent opposition to Mars and exacerbating the conflictual and violent relationship with Joe (her husband), but they are also shown to have been disrupted by Norma (Grace’s mother) as a Northern Italian woman who has left the white, diasporic heteronormative family unit and the domestic violence that was operating within it. These relations are encapsulated in the film to disrupt and transform the naturalisation of the biopolitical ‘order’ by showing its inherent violence.

Fistful of Flies is an important feminist political intervention that participates in the disruption and transformation of a violent insular imaginary shaping diasporic women’s lives cinematically and culturally. The film creation of a transmuted genre and grotesque style produce embodiments of women’s lives and mother-daughter relations that are struggling, disruptive and transformative. The film makes clear that mother-daughter relations are not pre-given or natural. They are mediated in this case by women’s varying relations with the territorialisation of transnational, diasporic communal/s and the complicity with state biopolitical interpellation in the construction of an insular Nation based on racial and ethnicised sexual borders. Violence bridges the embodiment of these normative borders.

The film’s engagement with diasporic women’s struggling bodies is also signified by the embodiment of a racial grotesque that becomes the site of (self) reflectivity, disruption and transformation. Grace acknowledges her complicity in violent relations when Mars attempts suicide. From this moment, Grace and Mars come together to stop the ongoing violence conducting their lives. The final scenes of Mars attempting to shoot Joe and of Grace peeing in the street are all public gestures that work to expel violent relations. Grace also welcomes Nonna Norma and her lover in

her family home. This does not create a complete transformation of the characters and mother-daughter relations but initiates possibilities based on the release of violence and the flies held in Mars fist.

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Notes

- [1] Although not a film, Rosa Cappiello (2003) 'Lucky Country' is an important literary feminist intervention that has produced a unique and critical expose of the 1970s urban lives of Italian diasporic women by commenting on themes of violence, friendships, loneliness, sexuality, abortion, suicide, work and familiar relations. Cappiello's settings refuse to locate these women within the borders of the diasporic family unit and redefine the meanings of diasporic relations.
- [2] I am borrowing this term from Marks and Polan's (2000) discussion of Intercultural Cinema as audio-visual projects translating the knowledge/s of the body, including the unrecorded memories of the senses.
- [3] Pellizzari has argued that in the film, violence is shown to be carried down through the three generations of women and that this can be changed. (Production Notes n.d.: 3)
- [4] Pellizzari short films 'Rabbit on the Moon' (1988), 'No, No Nonno' (1991), Best Wishes (1995) and Just Desserts (1994) won numerous awards, with national and some international acclaim. *Fistful of Flies* as Pellizzari's first feature film, did not enjoy similar Australian national recognition although it received international awards at the Gijon International Film Festival (1997), Sochi International Film Festival (1997), Sochi Open Russian Film Festival (1996), Stockholm Film Festival (1996) and at the prestigious Venice Film Festival (1996) where Pellizzari won the Elivira Notary Prize (see Monica Pellizzari Official Website (2001); Capp 2003).
- [5] Although the making and financing of this feature film was much anticipated in the press in the early 1990s (see SMH, 11 August 1993; Sydney Herald, September 1993), it did not eventually find the same level of national success as her short films. On the contrary, *Fistful of Flies* received mixed reviews and became the last film that this director made in Australia. Various Australian film critics such as Vicky Roach (Daily Telegraph, 29/6/1997) argued that although this was the work of an original filmmaker with a distinctive cinematic vision, the film was 'underdeveloped' and 'flat'. David Stratton warned that only audiences 'attuned to Pellizzari's style' will connect to the main character 'but without positive reviews distributors will have a tough job marketing this off-key exercise to a wide audience' (Variety Movie Review, 11/11/1996:18). Paul Fisher also concerned with 'alienation of audiences' proclaimed that it was destined to be controversial from the outset and wrote that '*Fistful of Flies* is a highly fragmented film the sole purpose of which seems to be to offer the moviegoer the most unpleasant movie experience of all time' (Fischer 1996). Lynden Barber also commented that as a member of the school of Australian grotesque, 'this tale of a small-town teenager...is overstated, overacted and laboriously derivative of early Jane Campion' (The Australian, 6/9/1996). Barber claimed that the success at the Venice Film Festival was linked to an (Italian) Catholic humour, thus denoting a perceived lack of connection with the Australian values of the perceived film

- goers. So in this sense, these critics argue that the film was not following the expectations set within viewers.
- [6] By internal borders, I am referring here to historical and current processes of institutionalisation, incarceration, the elevation of the Camp and detentions (Perera 2002).
- [7] A form of state-based whiteness that as I have argued elsewhere is also transposed, transnational and diasporic in that it is based on Anglophilic or Anglo-centric cultural ethos (see Palombo 2007; Perera 2009)
- [8] I am specifically referring here to the historical ascendancy of the Italian nation-state through a violent and military occupation of the Southern regions of Italy and ongoing north-south racial and ethnic differentiation (see Petraccone 2000; Pugliese 2008).
- [9] The White Australia Policy was informed by a preference for Northern Italians and Northern Europeans migrants. (O'Connor 1996; Pugliese 2002).
- [10] Women from the Southern regions of Italy came to be constituted as women of lower sexual morality that couldn't reproduce white children and that put at risk the racial purity affiliated with Northern Italian migrants, Northern Europeans but also that of white Australians. This racial differentiation historically was informed and supported by the work of European racial scientists like Cesare Lombroso who produced racial sexual hierarchies and promulgated discourses on filiative racial, sexual connections between female criminal offenders from the Southern regions of Italy including from Sicily, Sardinia and Calabria and 'Indian women', Abyssinian women', 'Hottentot women' and 'Australian Aboriginal women' so to characterise and profile 'primordial' and inferior racial women (See Lombroso 1911, 1895).
- [11] Double in the sense of being understood at the cusp of life and death, of rebirth or as to be recast into a new mold (see Gillespie 2007: 31).

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