***Travelling Subjects: Women’s Writing, Mobility and Photography[[1]](#footnote-1)***

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We live in a time obsessed by visual images: we remember, imagine and (re)construct places, objects, people, experiences and ourselves through images. Photographs, in particular, respond to our desire to stop the world, to frame and freeze it, to possess it and secure it in space and time. In particular, we are continually invited to take photographs through new optical and visual technologies, and to share them through social networks. Yet we live in an era of significant geographical mobility and displacement where notions of space, time and identity are alsoconstantly called into question in relation to the way we perceive ourselves and others visually. By the recording, display and narration of personal and collective experiences of mobility (from a short walk to long-distance travels, even to migration), every day we are provoked and encouraged to experiment with new ways of seeing and being. What happens then when photographic products (traditional and digital) come to influence or complement tales of displacement? In what ways does the writing of present and past experiences of mobility reflect and respond to photographic images? How are issues such as identity, memory (and nation) expressed through the interlacing of written and photographic texts? And how does what we see photographically and then narrate, reflect gender—in particular female identity—and displacement?

When we look at women’s writing, attention to the gendered politics of exile, decolonization, migration and immigration has recently led scholars to explore issues on the transmission of experiences and memory across spatial and generational boundaries, as in the scholarly work by Keya Ganguly and Sonia Saldívar-Hull. Feminist work on nostalgia, memory, trauma and practices of oral history, often linked to issues of exile (and the Holocaust), have been published by Elspeth Probyn, Annette Kuhn, Marianne Hirsch, Claire Kahane, Cathy Caruth and Sidonie Smith, among others. However, investigations focusing on women as both active and passive users of visual means—in particular photography—with regard to the questions of mobility in general, are still scarce, especially in Italian Studies.[[2]](#footnote-2) Some examples of non-Italian authors who have been the object of recent investigation for the use of and reflections on visual images in their writing about experiences of migration and exile are W. G. Sebald author of *Immigrants* (1993), Oscar Hijuelos and his *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien* (1994), as well as Yvonne Vera for her descriptions of (street and studio) photographs of Bulawayo (in South Africa) in *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). Within the Italian context, it is worth mentioning Younis Tawfik and his *Il profugo* (2006) as well as Ribka Sibhatu with his *Aulò: Canto poesia dell’Eritrea* (1998) illustrated by drawings attributed to the author and Marco Petrella, or the more sophisticated interlacing of visual aesthetics and writing in the books by Ornela Vorpsi.

The following pages will briefly outline part of my project, and my exploration of the interrelation between writing, photography and mobility in some contemporary women’s writing. In general the authors I am interested in are women who narrate their life stories, and the stories of (real or fictional) others, and share an interest in exploring the relationships between the public and private selves, within and across boundaries (personal, domestic and national, gender and sexual, as well as genre boundaries). They are well-known or less well-known authors somehow related to Italy by birth, family roots, language, or by no more than imagination.

These women’s writings – fictional and auto/biographical – have all been published in the last twenty years. This is a period characterized by economic, social, cultural and linguistic changes within the Italian context.[[3]](#footnote-3) These women’s writings emphasize internal and external tensions and invite us to reflect on the role of vision in processes of inclusion and exclusion, displacement, identification and Othering, as well as on the interconnections between questions of vision, gender, and social power.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the following pages I will first outline the theoretical background crucial to the construction of my analysis. I will then introduce two case studies as examples of two different ways in which writing and photography can interrelate in women’s narration with reference to different forms of mobility. In the first case, real photographs are used in order to re-construct episodes of migration in the author’s family history, through a writing in between fiction and (auto)biography. In the second case, the author refers to fictional photographic images in order to narrate fictional stories of controversial, errant women.

What type of mobility? What type of journeys?

We all travel and move. In different ways and manners we are mobile. We travel from one country, town, village, street to another; we cross enclosed spaces, such as a room, a corridor, a ward; we travel through space and also time. Even sitting or lying we may still embark on journeys through our thoughts and imagination. Iris Marion Young, summarizing Merleau-Ponty’s thought, states: “It is the body in its orientation toward and action upon and within its surroundings that constitutes the initial meaning-giving act”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is through travel, movement and mobility that we define ourselves and others.[[6]](#footnote-6) Susan Roberson for instance explains: “Travel is an important metaphor by which we discuss other fundamental activities of life: we speak of our lives as journey from birth to death and education as the road to knowledge. The journey is the metaphor by which we describe the mind’s workings, our flights of fancy and imaginative adventures”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Contemporary critics also claim that all narration is a form of travelling.[[8]](#footnote-8) Travel and mobility also define history, places and people. Regardless of the type of mobility we undertake, some commonalities remain in its definition: identity formation, dichotomy of travel and home, the relationship between power and knowledge, the relationship between space and body.

With regard to women’s mobility, as stated by Gillian Rose, women move through layers of geographies or places during the course of the day, going from home, to the market, the office, the daycare centre, each of which has its own dynamics, relations of power and knowledge. Each of these actions requests a reassessment of identity, and of the relationship between place and subjectivity. These places and geographies, however, have often been considered as limiting and limited forms of women’s mobility. According to Doreen Massey, “The limitations of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Women experience travel and mobility differently from men, generally because of their traditional roles, and constraints, within the house, their family and society. Furthermore, mobilities depend on and produce social norms, values and ideas about being a woman or a man.[[10]](#footnote-10)

At the same time, however, the “trope of female mobility has given impetus to figures of subjectivity in progress across disciplinary, conceptual, and cultural boundaries”,[[11]](#footnote-11) as stated by Sartini Blum. This means, we need to explore new ways of thinking about and being in the world. In general this makes us think that moving is not only going beyond geographical fixity, but also beyond disciplinary boundaries.

The female writers and photographers I am interested in include women born in Italy and are mother-tongue Italian, such as Elena Gianini Belotti, Melania Mazzucco, the little-known Anna Maria Riccardi, and the writer and photographer Carla Cerati. Other authors have adopted Italian as their creative language, as in the case of the Albanian writer and artist Ornela Vorpsi. It is also interesting to consider authors who write in English, but whose relation with Italy and everything Italian has been determined, constructed and fantasized through family roots, such as, to mention a few, the Italian American Susan Caperna Lloyd, Kim Ragusa, Annie Lanzillotto, or the Italian Australian Maria Pallotta Chiarolli, or the American Wallis Wilde Menozzi. These writers are second and third-generation migrants or are linked to Italy through sentimental relations. These women’s link to Italian culture is malleable and variable, and it invites us to reflect on, and challenge, the varied ways we can understand Italianness today, and the many factors involved in the construction of an Italian identity. We should always remember that identity is a site for a variety of discourses, construction and fantasies. National identities, in particular, are, as stated by Andreas Huyssen, founded on “extremely slippery terrain”. Sander L. Gilman argues that “we imagine ourselves into the world and are constantly reimagining ourselves. We are the collection not of our experiences, but of our fantasies about those experiences”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Identity – and national identity – are shifting and relational; they are mobile. These women’s books offer, therefore, examples of the cultural and literal plurality of (female) perceptions of Italy, of Italian society and culture, landscape, history, and politics.

By interlacing words and images, these women reconstruct stories of migration (for instance of their parents or grandparents), or narrate tales of nomadic, restless real and fictional women. Some of them also narrate stories of women who, although constrained within a claustrophobic (immobile) domestic world, experience forms of mobility that alter, change, disturb traditional systems and order, and consequently family and social relations.

Writing and/through photography

The women writers and artists mentioned above engage – albeit in different manners – with photography.

Photography occupies an ambivalent contested position in cultural theory: photographs include the spatial and temporal, seen and unseen, natural and cultural, visual and textual. Throughout the years scholars and practitioners have discussed its meaning, power and varied functions. Thus, for instance, for Benjamin, actual photographs are indexical transcriptions of light on film emulsion, and the record of an optical unconscious. Barthes sees them as the epitome of visual evidence, messages “without a code”, whose essence is to refer, not only to its subject in space, but to time’s passing, the “that has been”. They are also “surface” representations that end the possibility of narrative and history, as claimed by Sontag. For Berger they are dead, static objects “weak in intentionality”, although Tagg sees them as vehicles of power in historical relations and institutional practices, and with a social function. Finally, for Krauss too they are images always infused with writing.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In general, it appears that the perception of photographs as static, fixed images is predominant. Photographs, however, possess the power to *move* individuals. According to Tina Campt, photos “move us to affect and to be affected; they move us by shifting us from one intense experiential state to another. They can arrest us in ways that diminish our capacity to respond and they provoke us in ways that augment our capacity to engage”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Photographs can both refer to a journey towards another place or identity, and provoke personal and collective movements, as well as physical and emotional changes.

People and places are constantly on the move, while images (media and communications) are intermittently on the move to organize and structure personal and social life. For instance, photographs travel within families, across different generations, and over continents. They travel in time and space. Books too (and thus words that accompany and contextualize photographs) constitute (as a sort of family album) a vehicle for such movements. Books make the photographs (real or fictional, materially reproduced or just verbally described) move, circulate among people, places and times.

Photographs are to be seen, held and circulated. In this way they move along pathways of distribution passing on specific cultural messages and values to receptive viewers. Photographs are then, like films, mediators of cultural ideas which, today, can move in far-reaching ways through the Internet and digital technologies. Photographs, finally, transport the viewer to other imaginary geographies.

Photography, then, should not be perceived essentially as figurative of fixity and stillness. I rather see photographs and photographic acts as products and practices that imply various level of mobility. From the idea of the travelling light to the material exchange of photographic images, photography implies movement.

The female authors and their protagonists who interest me are often in search of photographs; in other cases photographs reach these women (for instance photographs are offered to them or are found by chance). Images invite and inspire these women to travel through space and time; photographs move them too toward forms of freedom and awareness. In each case, it is through words and the written page that the personal, creative, as well as fictional life of these women interlaces with photography. As asserted by Stuart Culver, photography has made it “increasingly difficult for us to enforce the traditional distinction between the arts of showing and those of telling”. This forces us “to reconsider the difference between visual images and linguistic signs”.[[15]](#footnote-15) The “ambivalent cohabitancy” of words and images claimed by Culver was, a question Barthes returned to again and again for over two decades. On the one hand, photographs are messages without codes (they are free of language); on the other, they are comprised of connotative codes (they are of language). With photography, there is no relay between the object and its image; there is instead a direct, physical connection between the sign and its object.[[16]](#footnote-16) Elaborating on the observations first offered by Walter Benjamin on the guiding role of the written text that accompanies a photograph, Barthes asserts that one way of anchoring the floating chain of signifieds is to root it with a linguistic message. Unlike Benjamin, who argues that a verbal text could rescue photography from contingency and approximation and photographic meaning from surface meaninglessness,[[17]](#footnote-17) Barthes considers the text repressive in so far as it encourages the viewer to select one meaning instead of others.[[18]](#footnote-18)

W.J.T. Mitchell has, more recently, also examined the relationship between photography and language, and ultimately contends that “photography is and is not a language; language also is and is not a photography”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Extending this observation into the realm of literature, Mitchell concludes that there is no definite boundary dividing literature and photography. “[A]ll arts,” he insists, “are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media”.[[20]](#footnote-20) Mitchell, like Barthes before him, grapples with and unveils the complex exchange between photography and writing. Both representational systems possess narrative and textual elements and both engage in a process of framing. In other words, photography and literature tell a story and they do so through a point of view.[[21]](#footnote-21) They can both influence the way events, objects, and people are perceived, understood, and remembered.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Interactions between photographs and literature – where photographs are placed alongside printed text to create “photo-texts”, or where text is incorporated into photographs as in postmodern “photo-graphy” – partake in and complicate formal-ethical debate. Post-modern photography, writes Linda Hutcheon, links verbal and visual discourses to highlight “the theoretical implications of the differences between, on the one hand, meaning-producing within the two separated and differing discourses and, on the other, any meaning created through their interaction”.[[23]](#footnote-23) In some texts I analyse, material photographs are inserted in the book; or real and fictional photographs are simply described and narrated in the book; or stories are specifically inspired by photographs; or photographic style and aesthetics inspire the author’s writing and language. In any case these texts are representative not only of how photography shapes—stylistically, linguistically, aesthetically—fictional and nonfictional writing alike, but also of how photography and writing also have political, social, and ethical implications. As Mitchell asserts: “The relation of photography and language is a principal site of struggle for value and power in contemporary representations of reality; it is the place where images and words find and lose their conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity”.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Elena Gianini Belotti and Anna Maria Riccardi: real photographs and migration family history[[25]](#footnote-25)

Narrative texts that aim to reconstruct personal history, family history and biographies very often resort to the use of photographs. In some cases the process of writing is activated by looking at an old photographic image. At other times, the writing is inspired by oral stories or written documents, but a visual image is needed in order to identify, appropriate and validate scenes and faces known through other people’s narration. Through this process, light is cast on an anonymous or forgotten photograph found in an archive or in a family album which is given a meaning, a story and a title by the text that accompanies it. In contemporary European literature one of the most important examples of this interaction between photographs and text is the narrative work of W.G. Sebald – especially his *The Emigrants* (1993) – with its recurrent focus on the links between individual, familial and collective memory, and on the generational transmission of such memory.[[26]](#footnote-26)

As also mentioned earlier, photographs, therefore, travel across time and space, supplying the links between individuals and their past and providing also the socio-historic context (photographic archives, museums, exhibitions and albums) in which narrative is woven. At the same time, it is through photographs – together with stories recounted – that people lost in time and space can travel back to us. This is particularly evident whenever old photographic images are retrieved and used in narratives of migration and exile.

Recently, in Italy, a growing body of literature is being devoted to episodes of Italian migration and exodus at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries. It is probably not by chance that a number of these books are by female writers, some examples being Laura Pariani’s *Quando Dio ballava il tango* (2002), Melania Mazzucco’s internationally recongnised *Vita* (2003), *Oltremare* by Mariangela Sedda (2004), Graziella Bonansea’s *Come il re e la regina* (2004), Rossana Carcassi’s *L’Orafo* (2005), *Cronache dalla collina* (2006) by Anna Maria Riccardi and *Pane Amaro* (2006) by Elena Gianini Belotti.[[27]](#footnote-27)These books are hybrid texts, an amalgam of biography, autobiographical writing, history, memoir and fiction. Typically mixing imagination and information from a variety of documents – from family archives and public records – many of these authors reorganize and narrate the story and migration experience of their parents or grandparents. One aspect, however, which needs to be considered as particularly recurrent in many of these books is the authors’ use of visual imagery in the process of both construction and narration of their stories. On various occasions photographs are referred to and described by the characters. In some cases, however, photographic images are added in the texts as supplementary documents. It can be argued that what makes these texts different from male texts is usually women’s preference to focus on a family saga, being, most of the time, that of their own families. Through her book – and the narrator’s voice – the female writer plays and replays the role as keeper of family and community relations, as well as holder and vehicle of the family’s memories. She bears witness to stories that have been fragmented, interrupted and even silenced by separation. As pointed out by Patricia Holland, both in the past and today women:

have become the historians, the guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the family archive. […] Women have pioneered forms of writing about the past which explore areas tangential to the mainstream of political and economic changes.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The little-known *Cronache dalla collina* is illustrated throughout with heterogenous images from public archives and private collections, which have no direct link with the author’s family or the characters of the story. But they are employed in the text as a sort of falsification of the family history. In *Pane amaro*, on the other hand, one family picture appears on the book cover; other portraits are fully integrated into the narrative as ekphrastic references and exist through the words used to describe them and through characters’ responses to them. Because of both similarities and differences they share, I consider these two books as case studies to identify two ways in which the collaboration between verbal and visual means can be used to deal with the past, in the context of migration and family history.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The chemical and physical processes involved in the production of a photograph indicate that it usually represents specific realities and offers irrefutable evidence. What is given to us is, however, a relic, a ruin: the truth that the photograph offers us can be read in the “traces of what is no longer present”, and what is no longer before us. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes suggests that if “the photograph possesses an evidential force” its testimony “bears not on the object but on time”.[[30]](#footnote-30) Eduardo Cadava – in his studies demonstrating how Benjamin articulates his concept of history through language and photography – specifies that this “time” is the image’s incapacity to coincide with itself. Every image is:

an image of its own interruption – an image of explosion of space and the erasure of time. Exposing the image to the movement of its disappearance or dissolution, it exposes it to ruin, to damage, to annihilation. […] This is why an image is never already constituted but is always in the process of its constitution.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Seen as a ruin or trace, the photograph begs not only for a meaning and an “intentionality”, but also for a context a before and an after that only verbal descriptions can provide.[[32]](#footnote-32) In contrast to the visual image, verbal language, as Barthes puts it, remains at the level of generalisation; words are, in fact, by nature, fictional: “It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself”.[[33]](#footnote-33) Photographs thus supplement the text thanks to their testimonial power. As Berger observes, words “which by themselves remain at the level of generalisation, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful”.[[34]](#footnote-34) The relationship between words and photograph, therefore, should be understood as a compromise where weaknesses – and strengths – are reciprocally compensated. It is according to this perspective of a mutual exchange of authenticity and meaning that, on one level, the interaction between photograph and text in these books should be understood. Within this process the distinction between fiction and facts, imagination and documentation is very often blurred.

By drawing from visual theorizations, we can look at the way in which the past and distant beloved people can be retrieved through this relationship of words and images in *Cronache dalla collina* and *Pane amaro.* I focus on the private use of migration photographs, and I also consider aspects of the social function of these illustrations. In particular, one question that needs special consideration is how these women authors deal with the temporality of the photographic image in order to reconstruct both a personal and collective history.

*Cronache dalla collina* is a little-known narrative that narrates the story of the author’s grandparents from 1865 to 1914. Most of the book is set in the tiny village of Torre Maggiore, in Puglia. The last part, however, is devoted to her grandfather’s migration to New York. The story is set against the rise of the anarchist movement after Italian Unification in 1860, and the “peasant question” in Southern Italy, the thwarted struggle for land tenure that led to the migration of hundreds of thousands of southern Italians to the United States and to northern Italy. In *Cronache dalla collina* the story is told from the narrative viewpoint of the author’s grandfather. In this way the author can bring him back to life and back to his native village. Through her grandfather, Riccardi can also act as saviour and preserver of a fragile collective past: the history and traditions of Torre Maggiore, as well as the history of its people migrating to the United States and to Northern Italy. But much of the visual record had already vanished, and other photographs have been co-opted into a falsification of the family history. The photographs represent customs, peasant life, groups of people, rural buildings and various activities in Torre Maggiore, as well as migration scenes: people leaving and arriving, Italian children, people at work, and streets in the United States. Some of these images come from a private archive owned by a photographer from Torre Maggiore; others from the Alinari Photographic Archive in Florence. Photographs in *Cronache dalla collina* do not specifically depict the characters in the story; almost all of the photographs are untitled and their origin is not acknowledged in the book. Most of the time the reader is therefore left free to speculate on the link between the places and people reproduced in the photographs and those described in the text. For example, the reader is encouraged to interpret two images of rural dwellings as the houses of the main protagonists. Therefore, if on one hand the photographs appear to work as evidence of the past and appear to add an element of “factuality’”, at the same time the way they are used seems to deny the documentary status of the photographs. Rather, they are selected, inserted and organized in the book through a personal, subjective reading of the past. The effect they produce is that of reinforcing a sense of departure and nostalgia. At the same time, incorporated into the text as traces of a vanished time and a distant world, these images help to enhance the already mythic aura attached to the village, the fairy-tale atmosphere created by the story, as well as enhancing the mythic elements of the author’s own family history.

Published in 2006, *Pane amaro* narrates the miserable American experience of the author’s father. The book marks also a departure from Belotti’s usual essays and works of fiction that focus on female experiences of childhood and ageing.[[35]](#footnote-35) Late in the account a very detailed description of a photograph is offered to the reader. This is a photo-portrait of the character Gildo taken in a photographic studio in San Francisco. It is part of a collective imagery of both social aspiration and delusion, hope and displacement. Photographs like this one were often sent, together with letters, by Italian emigrants to their families back in Italy.[[36]](#footnote-36) The text then verbally “cites” images existing in archives, documents and albums. Whether these photographs are understood as objects touched, scrutinised and commented by the characters, or as citations of a collective past inserted in the text, they tell us of ruins, of spatially and temporally distant “Others”, and of what is no longer present. The subjects and their history are made to return through verbal means twice: orally when images are commented by the characters and in written words when described in the text. Words and memory can put the salvaged fragments together into a new meaningful order. As we read that description of Gildo’s photo-portrait, we realize that it coincides with the photograph on the cover of the book. Its significance, therefore, should be more specifically sought also in the personal sphere, since the photograph is the portrait of the author’s father.

Pictures bridge individual memories and collective memories, and blur the boundaries between social and personal histories, but in order to do this they need a narrative, stories and words that can direct, or even anchor, their meaning.

Through their novels about family migration Anna Maria Riccardi and Elena Gianini Belotti connect the lost world of their family, or of a single individual within it, with the present. In their works their amalgam of verbal and visual material produces a reunification and a sort of “homecoming”. Through both images and words people and their lives in a distant place and time are brought back to the present and to their own family or community. In particular, by looking at and using photographs the viewer appropriates the lives and the bodies of people who have disappeared or who have lived before her, and makes them part of her own present. It is a strategy in reaction to the estrangement and fragmentation of everyday life, and to the impossibility of creating a direct dialogue with (spatially and temporally) distant people. Through the lives and images of others, the author also makes her own private journey across time and space. In this way, while she traces her relatives’ trajectories, she can perform a sort of “re-location” of her own routes and roots. The photograph, therefore, becomes the meeting point where the author’s life and the lives of distant others intersect both visually and imaginarily, and where she can repeatedly reorganize and reassess her identity as woman, daughter, granddaughter and as a member of a group – her family, her family’s original community, as well as her country of origin.

Finally, whether fragments of the family past or falsifications of the family history, it should be stressed that photographs in the text participate in a process of performativity, or what Judith Butler calls “the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration”.[[37]](#footnote-37) The female author appropriates old photographs and re-represents, re-cites and re-writes stories together with the help of oral and written material. By re-constructing her family history through the use of different sources, the author re-traces and re-moulds both her past and present life.[[38]](#footnote-38) As claimed by Roland Barthes: “the Photograph is the advent of myself as other and with it a cunning dissociation of consciousness of identity”.[[39]](#footnote-39) By using photographs from family and public archives and placing them in her book, the author-viewer re-positions herself as reading and viewing subject: she can now recognize herself both in the other and *as* the other.

Melania Mazzucco: fictional photographs and vanishing women

Photography and writing can narrate mobility in varied ways by mixing reality with fiction. This is exemplified by the Italian novelist Melania Mazzucco who, in the last few years, has reached a vast popularity in Italy and abroad. Scholarly studies have been focusing on Mazzucco’s hybrid, detailed works that lie between fiction and documentary, moving from historical novel to epic and to postmodern *noir.* Mazzucco’s first novel was *Il bacio della Medusa* (*Medusa’s Kiss*, 1996), followed by *La camera di Baltus* (*Baltus’s Room*, 1998) and *Lei così amata* (*She So Loved*, 2000). In 2002 her novel *Vita* attracted interest for its historical and social attention to Italian migration, as well as for her revisitation of the forms of the conventional immigrant novel.[[40]](#footnote-40) In 2005 she published *Un giorno perfetto* (*A Perfect Day*). In 2008 and 2009 Mazzucco published two works on the Italian Renaissance painter Tintoretto, the novel, *La lunga attesa dell’angelo* (*The Long Wait for the Angel*, 2008), and the study *Jacomo Tintoretto e i suoi figli* (*Jacomo Tintoretto and His Children,*2009). In 2012 she published *Limbo*, and her latest novel – at the time of writing – is *Sei come sei* (2013).[[41]](#footnote-41)

On a few occasions scholars have mentioned Mazzucco’s ability to construct a visual narrative, stemming from her background in cinema and visual studies. Most of her books have been imbued with a tendency to photographic and cinematographic style. However, scholars have not really defined and analyzed this visual mode, preferring to focus mainly on the narrative strategies or thematic issues in Mazzucco’s work.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Mazzucco’s books are stories of mobile, rebel figures narrated through constant temporal shifts, with the crossing of genre borders, and incursions into visuality. These are novels characterized by “mobility” in both her (female) characters and the narrative. According to Cresswell “mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity and as modernity, sit side by side with mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance. Mobility, then, is more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before”.[[43]](#footnote-43) As mentioned earlier, women’s mobility has inspired and produced a subjectivity on the move across disciplinary, conceptual, and cultural boundaries.[[44]](#footnote-44) In Mazzucco’s stories resistance to fixity is achieved through a representational practice that interlaces writing with visual, and in particular, photographic aesthetics. As I argue, mobility and visuality join in Mazzucco’s stories to create *vanishing* figures. Following Karen Beckman I use the word “vanishing” here as a strategy of “defiant resistance” to eradication; a “process” during which the female subject is “never fully absent or fully present” and that “produces desire and longing but also unrest”.[[45]](#footnote-45) The mobile, vanishing nature of Mazzucco’s protagonists is noticeable in the way they act and are (re)presented to the reader, in particular through recurrent relationships with visual means. One example can be seen in Mazzucco’s first novel, *Il bacio della Medusa,* where we can see the narrator’s effort (and failure) to provide some sort of *tangibility* to her rebel, enigmatic and errant protagonists, through visuality in her writing.

Mazzucco’s stories narrate experiences of nomadism, solitude, search for freedom and the Self. As stated by Stefania Lucamante, much of Mazzucco’s work is based on the “eccentric lives of tormented and peripatetic women”. These are “women who bend the rules established by society, independent of their geographical situation”. Their eccentricity positions them “away from the centre, be it outside of conformist society […] or outside of gender and societal constrictions”.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Mazzucco’s female protagonists are characters, whether completely fictional or based on people who *really* existed, who travel across boundaries: gender, geographical, and temporal. Their journeys are a response to a sense of restlessness and a search for identity. They are often unpredictable, unsettled, and excentric female figures difficult to halt, control and possess. These female protagonists represent contemporary women’s dreams of freedom, creativity and individuality, and of women’s aspirations. As Mazzucco declares:

Nei miei romanzi ho sempre cercato di narrare figure femminili inquiete, non troppo rassicuranti e non convenzionali. Che avessero cioè i sogni e le aspirazioni di tutte le donne, ma allo stesso tempo fossero alla ricerca di qualcosa, lottando per non restare prigioniere del modello femminile tradizionale.[[47]](#footnote-47)

An ex-centric is, according to Teresa De Lauretis, a subject who, through personal, political and textual practices, challenges and “dis-locates” herself from normative, socio-cultural discourses, and models of identity.[[48]](#footnote-48) It is a point of view as a position of resistance and agency, beyond normative socio-cultural discourse and modes of identity. Whether by migration or exile, these women’s mobility is a way to subvert the trope of domestic stasis. We can see that in Mazzucco’s first novel, *Il bacio della Medusa,* the young and mysterious Medusa is a vagabond moving from a small mountain village in Piedmont Italy to France, and then travelling from one Piedmontese village to another, to Turin and back to France. Vita, the protagonist of Mazzucco’s novel devoted to Italian migration and her family history, is a young emigrant to New York, from a small village in Southern Italy, a wanderer around New York, a traveller to Italy in search of her beloved Diamante, and an elusive character of whom almost no traces are left in real life. The androgynous Annemarie Schwarzenbach, the protagonist of *Lei così amata,* is a rebel journalist and photographer travelling from Switzerland around Europe, from Afghanistan to Persia and to the United States. All the tormented female protagonists of *La camera di Baltus* do not want, or cannot have, a domestic abode as a stable, reassuring point of reference, from the mystic Alma who locks herself in a tower, to the drug-addicted Luisa who lives among disorder in the crumbling Bastia del Garbo Castle, and Azra a young Bosnian war refugee. The main protagonist of *Limbo* is Manuela, a female soldier from Afghanistan – where she has been the victim of a bomb – who, after months in a hospital, returns to Italy, but nevertheless finds it difficult to settle down to an orderly life in her small native town near Rome. These protagonists’ journeys are not escapes, but rather stages of an unstable or inadequate existence. Mobility is for these protagonists a way to reject fixed or habitual categories of identity in order to discover a lost or undiscovered Self. They are active subjects that also reflect changing social realities. With this idea in mind, Mary Morris argues that “because of the way that women have cultivated their inner lives, a journey often becomes a dialogue between the inner and outer, between our emotional necessity and the reality of the external world”.[[49]](#footnote-49) Displacement, thus, does not lead these women to nostalgia for the past or something left behind. Their journeys also imply performativity and a collapse of defined identities. They adopt male names, wear male clothing and often display gender ambiguity as a challenge to societal and cultural conventions.[[50]](#footnote-50) These heroines live in a world perceived as precarious, unstable and dominated by oppressive conventions and rules. As a consequence, they react to limitations through eccentricity: they scandalize and perturb.[[51]](#footnote-51) As Sartini-Blum explains, “Oscillating between representations of a castrating threat and of a seductive trap, women’s mobility is synonymous with unruliness: sexual and metaphorical promiscuity, loss of (self)control, blurring of boundaries, negation of difference, meaning, and value”.[[52]](#footnote-52) The ex-centric subject stands out and “dis-locates” herself from ideological structures of power/knowledge. According to De Lauretis ex-centrity is space (and an identity) which echoes the spatial figure of an “elsewhere” that is, however, also “here and now”. The ex-centric subject does not isolate herself but produces knowledge and a response from the margins. It is her being there and here at the same time that makes her powerful.

The coming and going of these women as intermittent, vanishing and ghostly presences, place them in a position of resistance and agency. Yet, the whole image of these evanescent women is difficult to grasp. The author constructs and recreates the life of these women through fragmentary written and oral material, both fictional and real. Among this material, visual images, in the form of (fictional or real) photographs, come to play a significant role. Visual images have the potential to hold and stop – although temporarily – these shadows.[[53]](#footnote-53) Photography, in particular, allows the author-viewer to “search for *what was there*”,[[54]](#footnote-54) and visually move throughout time. Yet the assumed fixing functionality of photography is often destined to fail in the face of the fleeting subject.

The fictional photograph, and in particular its referential power, becomes one of the author’s devices to create an illusion of reality within the fictional reality of the novel itself. Many photographs described and narrated in Mazzucco’s stories have never existed. Barthes’ “that-has-been” and their referential power collapse within the fictional literary world created by the author. Fictional photographic images are created and exist only within the written language. According to Barthes “language is, by nature, fictional”. The photograph’s meaning thus lies in its narration. Consequently, the subject of a fictional photograph is a shadow twice, within the photographic medium and within the fictional work. In an essay entitled “La contesa con l’ombra” Mazzucco describes the creation of a photographic image in the dark room:

Le lastre opache contengono ancora il Tutto, frammenti nebulosi e informi dell’universo, schegge dell’essere. Poi le immagini impresse emergono lentamente sul vetro e si accingono a riprodurre qualcosa. Con un procedimento che al cinema è piuttosto comune, la fotografia che affiora a poco a poco sulla lastra si anima. Le statiche, remote figure in posa prendono forma, nome, corpo: hanno un luogo, un tempo, una voce.[[55]](#footnote-55)

As Mazzucco explains, something similar happens in the mind of the story-teller. A scene, a time, people and objects are initially framed and then, plunged into the darkness of the dark room (of the imagination or subconscious), and details begin appearing on paper. Often details or characters, whose inclusion in the photographic plate or page was not planned, seem to emerge too. For this process, Mazzucco says, the photographer and the writer have little control over their work.[[56]](#footnote-56) This happens in one of the initial scenes of *Il bacio della Medusa* where a photographer is taking a family picture on the occasion of a wedding. The photographer does not realize that shadows and other presences come into view behind the group framed: “[R]espinte negli angoli del quadretto composto dal fotografo ma sinteticamente compresenti, si intrufolano presenze estranee” (*Il bacio*, p. 13). The photographer submits to the power of the camera capturing details against his intention. In particular :

una bambina di circa otto anni coi capelli scarruffati. […] Non è in posa: anzi, al momento dello scatto deve essersi mossa e viene colta in un gesto qualunque che mantiene la naturalezza prodigiosa delle istantanee rubate all’insaputa dei protagonisti. Guarda in basso, alla sua sinistra; ha un braccio levato, forse sta chiamando qualcuno, comunque non sembra accorgersi della messinscena e la annulla. Il gesto imprevedibile della bambina rovescia il significato della composizione e tradisce la forzata immobilità degli altri, svelando il lavoro occulto del fotografo.[[57]](#footnote-57) (*Il bacio*, p. 14)

The young girl is called Medusa. In her poor outfit she is a source of disturbance in the stiff photographic composition which includes the other protagonists of the story, particularly for Norma Boncompagni, the bride, and her husband, the count Argentero, portrayed in the group picture. Medusa enters the others’ lives and, in particular Norma’s existence. And the photograph itself anticipates changes and movements in the life of the protagonists. Medusa’s presence, however, will be only revealed at the moment of the development of the picture, in the darkroom where reality “emerges”: as the author says, an “emersione della realtà*”* takes place.[[58]](#footnote-58) In such an epiphanic moment the story starts taking shape from a sort of “primordial chaos”. (Mazzucco also recalls a similar process happening in Antonioni’s film *Blow Up*). The photograph comes alive and its subjects, from being immobile become characters with their own story. As in a sort of cinematographic procedure the reader-spectator enters the photograph and the narration starts:

Poi le immagini impresse affiorano lentamente sul vetro e si accingono a produrre, riprodurre qualcosa che da qualche parte, chissà dove, già esiste. È la nascita. Ogni dettaglio anche il più insignificante e trascurabile, solo casualmente inquadrato dall’obiettivo, è perfettamente a fuoco. Deve esserlo. Le figure hanno preso forma, nome, corpo: hanno un luogo, un tempo, una voce. (*Il bacio*, pp. 17-18)

In these initial pages of the novel Mazzucco compares the development process to the writing one; in the “darkroom” of her imagination and fantasy a world emerges with people, places and objects coming from the past, like the figures in a photograph. Mazzucco here puts the accent on the relationship between a past, the present of the creation and the future of the story and its characters. Writing and photography refer to the Barthian “that-has-been” and, at the same time, they point at a “here” and “now”.

The photograph described above is also used as a stratagem to introduce the two main female protagonists. The “accidental” subject, Medusa, can also be seen as a figure from the past, pointing at a present and entering, disturbing and subverting the future of the other protagonists:

Nello stesso momento Norma si accorge della bambina sul muretto: imbronciata, delusa, la sta indicando, le punta il dito contro. Il gesto non le piace, le sembra minaccioso, ostile, accusatorio. […] La bambina non sa di essere entrata nella vita degli Argentero e di Norma, non sa di essere diventata una protagonista imprescindibile di questa storia. Soltanto adesso scende dal muretto e scompare tra la folla. Il fotografo impreca sottovoce, ma è troppo tardi, e Madlenin Belmondo, la Medusa, esiste. (*Il bacio*, p. 18)

Mazzucco tells us about the creative birth of a character. At the same time, however the reader is presented with the personality and the vanishing, ex-centric nature of Medusa. She is a restless, fleeting character. She is also here and there at the same time, both present and absent in the picture. She is now present in the white page, the photographic image and the life of the other characters. At the same time she is absent as not being really part of the formal photographic composition and because – like the other subjects of the photograph – she exists only in the past of that photographic image. The definition of ex-centric for Mazzucco’s female protagonists echoes one of the main paradoxes of photography: its combination of the “that-has-been” or “there-ness” (the time/place of what has been photographed) with the “here-and-now’ness”, as the photograph brings into its always-open moment of being looked at what it captured in a specific time and space. The photo-image thus simultaneously inhabits its originating past and produces its perpetual present.[[59]](#footnote-59) It can be argued, however, that in the case of this image the reader (and fictional viewer) is also offered another dimension, the “this-will-be”. The photograph, and Medusa in it, point (as Medusa does with her gesture) at what will follow in the narration.

In the photograph, then, the invisible is present inside the visible. For Benjamin it is the result of technical advances and their power to provide greater mimetic possibilities. Photography can reveal to us what the naked eye cannot see, Benjamin’s “optical unconscious”:

The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear; it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject […] Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Technological mediation makes reality more intensely visible. The image appears to us then as magic, and as possessing a subjectivity of its own.[[61]](#footnote-61) In *Il bacio della Medusa* we are, however, faced with a fictional photograph. The invisible is made to appear vivid through words. It is a verbal representation of visual objects constructed within a fictional reality. It is shaped by the verbal text. This photograph does not exist as an object; its referential authority is compromised by the verbal text that forms and frames it. The verbal and the visual are, however, together the means through which the writer is trying to stop and freeze vanishing creatures who are almost shadows. Writing and photography then attempt to register the *passage* of subjects, as well as their absences. The image (visual and verbal) is arrested movement. The viewer-reader, therefore, is left with a trace that is also a representation of a reality that has evaporated and vanished. The image corresponds to the impossible effort to arrest and retain people, objects and events.

Mazzucco’s works are often filled up with optical devices: magic lanterns, traditional and digital cameras, opticians’ instruments, internet images and videogames. As visual prostheses all these means summon up the enigma of appearances. We can say that they express, on one side, the photographer’s and writer’s attempt to mobilize and fix her subject or protagonist, and on the other, the subject’s rebellion against such fixity. They demonstrate the unpredictability and difficulty of controlling lives and the meaninglessness of creating boundaries and imposing limitations. In Mazzucco’s novels the vanishing, fictional (female) protagonists – and their bodies – seem to be the expression of an anxiety about materiality and fixity. Words and visual images here are also suspended in the perpetual process of becoming: words become images and images are offered to us through words.

In conclusion, although, in the works by Riccardi, Belotti and Mazzucco, journeys are of different types, the authors, and the (fictional or real) protagonists of their stories, are all involved in some kind of mobility, across time, places and generations. Their mobility, thus, is not simply geographical. Their journeys are also imaginary, mental experiences or metaphors for life. Whatever the means and methods of their spatial and temporal movement, their journeys promote some sort of change and (mis)knowledge about themselves and the world. Moreover, these authors’ interlacing of writing with photography makes us reflect on, and query, the dynamics, tensions and anxieties of representation. Photographs in writing, whether (auto)biographical or fictional, can be seen as symbolic of the challenge of representing reality both through words and visual images, and of capturing the temporality (and mobility) of life in a spatial form.

1. This paper was delivered at the Director’s Research Seminar held at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Studies, University of London, on 8 January 2014. The paper is a work-in-progress discussion of part of my project on “Photo-textual journeys: women’s writing, photography and mobility”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For one study on women’s artistic production of the autobiographical occurring at the interface of visuality and textuality,see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Interfaces*. *Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 2002). Within the field of Italian Studies, recent attention has been directed to representations of women’s migration in contemporary Italian women’s cinema. See, for instance Bernadette Luciano and Susanna, *Reframing Italy. New Trends in Italian Women’s Filmmaking* (Purdue University Press, 2012), and Flavia Laviosa, ed., *Visions of Struggle in Women’s Filmmaking in the Mediterranean* (London: Palgrave, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A further dimension has seen the concept of Italianness put into question. For recent work on Italianness and Italian identity in twentieth-first century Italy see Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, eds, *Revisioning Italy. National Identity and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri, eds, *Italy Today. The Sick Man of Europe* (London: Routledge, 2010), Michela Ardizzoni, *North/South, East/West. Mapping Italianness on Television* (Lexington Books, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, Birgit Spengler, “Introduction: Appropriating Vision(s): Visual Practices in American Women’s Writing”, *Amerikastudien/American Studies. A Quarterly*, Vol 54, no. 1 (2009), 1-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty quoted in Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 35. According to Young the “body is the first locus of intentionality, as pure presence to the world and openness upon its possibilities. The most primordial intentional act is the motion of the body orientating itself with respect to and moving within its surroundings”. Young, pp. 35-36. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception.* Trans Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cresswell defines movement as “abstracted mobility”, mobility abstracted from contexts of power. According to his definition, movement describes the idea of an act of displacement that allows people to move between locations. It is the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies, and social implications of that movement are considered. Timothy Cresswell, *On the Move. Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York/London: Routledge, 2006), p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Susan L. Roberson, “Defining Travel: an Introduction”, in *Defining Travel. Diverse Visions*, ed. by Susan L. Roberson, University Press of Mississippi, 2001; pp. xi-xxvi (p.xi). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the case of the metaphor “travel” in Georges Van Den Abbeele, *Travel as Metaphor from Montaigne to Rousseau* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Regarding the ambivalence of “travel” Clifford points out that travel is both generalized and simplified. It can denote an experience of “mobility and movement through which people experience a range of material, spatial practices, that produce knowledge, stories, traditions, comportments, musics, books, diaries and other cultural expressions ”. James Clifford, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 35 and 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 179. For instance, much of the traditional discussion of travel assumes a male traveller. See Paul Fussell, *British Literary Traveling between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), and Eric J Leed, *The Mind of the Traveller. From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (London: Basic Books, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In his book *On the Move*, Cresswell analyses some of Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic studies of human mobility. In Muybridge’s hundreds of photographs men and women were portrayed as involved in a variety of activities. Men were photographed involved in forms of motion, such as running, fencing, boxing and as experts or masters of their motions. Women, on the other hand, were photographed in activities related to arts and aesthetics and never referred to as masters of their motions. They were described with reference to their civil status, age or height, and so as representative of their every-day mobility. Cresswell, *On the Move,* pp. 63-69. See also T.P. Uteng T.P. and T. Cresswell, eds, *Gendered Mobilities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cinzia Sartini-Blum, *Rewriting the Journey in Contemporary Italian Literature. Figures of Subjectivity in Progress* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 71. Sander L. Gilman, “Introduction”, in *America in the Eyes of the Germans: An Essay on Anti-Americanism*, by Dan Diner (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1996), pp. xi-xviii (p. xviii). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1973) (New York: Anchor, 1990); Umberto Eco, “Critique of the Image”, in *Thinking Photography* ed. by Victor Burgin (London: MacMillan, 1982), pp. 32-38; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), and “The Photographic Message” (1961). *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 15-31; Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography” (1931), *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete’s Island Books 1980), pp. 199-216; and *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Vintage, 1982), John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005 [1988]); Rosalind Krauss, *Le photographique. Pour une théorie des écarts* (1974-85) (Paris: Macula, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters. Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Stuart Culver, “How Photographs Mean: Literature and the Camera in American Studies”, *American Literary History*, Vol.1, no. 1 (1989), 190-205, (p. 190). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Barthes, “The Photographic Message”. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Barthes, “The Photographic Message”. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, pp. 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Joseph B. Entin, *Sensational Modernism. Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Presss, 2007), pp. 26-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The relationship between photography and memory, in particular, is treated in great detail in Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, as well as in Kracauer’s reflections. For Kracauer, photography’s records overtook memory’s fragmentariness.[Need reference here] [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This section is an excerpt from my “Re-locating the past: photographs, family and migration stories in Anna Maria Riccardi’s *Cronache dalla collina* and Elena Gianini Belotti’s *Pane amaro*”, *The Italianist*, 30 (1), 2010, 99-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For one recent critical analysis of Sebald’s use of photography in his works see Jonathan J. Long, “History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten”*, *Modern Language Review* 98.1 (2003), 117-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Among other works on Italian exile and migration by women one could also mention: Erminia Dell’Oro, *Asmara Addio* (1988); Luciana Capretti, *Ghibli* (2004); Regina Cimmino, *Quella terra è la mia terra. Istria: memorie di un esodo* (2005); Anna Maria Mori, *Nata in Istria* (2006); Graziella Ghermandi, *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007). These are mostly writings linked to the ex-colonies and ex-Italian territories. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Patricia Holland, “History, Memory and the Family Album”, in *Family Snaps. The Meaning of Domestic Photography,* ed. by Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (London: Virago, 1991), pp.1-14 (p. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Melania Mazzucco’s *Vita* is another interesting novel in which photographs (in particular photo-portraits) are included in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 88-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Eduardo Cadava, “*Lapsus Imaginis*: The Image in Ruins”, *October* 96 (2001), 35-60 (p. 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (London: Writers and Readers, 1982), Mary Price, *The Photograph: a Strange Confined Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), and Clive Scott, *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Berger, *Another Way of Telling*, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Elena Gianini Belotti’s background as a pedagogist inspired her first books, which include *Dalla parte delle bambine* (1973) and *Prima le donne e i bambini* (1980). Among her fictional works one should mention *Il fiore dell’ ibisco* (1985), *Adagio un poco mosso* (1993), *Pimpì Oselì* (1995), *Voli* (2001) and *Prima della quiete. Storia di Italia Donati* (2003). For one critical work on her production see Silvia Ross, ‘Subverting Stereotypes of Aging in Elena Gianini Belotti’s *Adagio un poco mosso’*, *Italica* 84 (2007), 422-437. Although apparently devoted to a male figure *Pane amaro* also contains pages which depict various female characters, one of these being the main character’s mother. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Earlier in the novel, a group of Gildo’s fellow countrymen scrutinize ecstatically a similar photo-portrait received from a friend in the United States. But, in the end, they are left baffled when they discover the trickery: “Il Bepo, emigrato da quasi dieci anni, all’ultima lettera alla moglie aveva accluso una fotografia che aveva lasciato tutti di stucco: le mani appoggiate sul volante, stava seduto in una lussuosa automobile scoperta dalle poltrone di pelle lustra imbottite come materassi, ai lati del cofano poderoso brillava una coppia di fari di ottone, i raggi delle ruote protette dai parafanghi scintillavano come raggi di sole. Il Bepo, che quando viveva alla Badea era vestito di stracci e tirava la vita coi denti, aveva in testa un’elegante bombetta nera, il colletto inamidato della camicia strangolato da una cravatta di seta a fiocco, tra i risvolti della giacca si intravedeva il gilè e la catena d’argento dell’orologio infilato nel taschino. La sua faccia, ornata di due prodigiosi mustacchi che prima non aveva mai avuto, grondava orgoglio e soddisfazione. […] Quello che di forza s’era impossessato della fotografia, l’aveva scrutata attentamente, e sì, aveva convenuto, il fondale era proprio una coperta bianca, e se si guardava bene l’angolo in basso a sinistra, si vedeva anche un pezzo di frangia. […] Uno aveva raccolto lo sconcerto di tutti e concluso che si trattava di un’automobile finta, senza motore, forse di latta, di legno o magari di cartapesta, collocata sullo sfondo della coperta nel cortile del fotografo e usata chissà da quanti altri emigrati che volevano fare colpo sui parenti e sugli allocchi rimasti in paese”(*Pane amaro*, pp. 17-18). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For further discussion on the role of family photographs in female auto/biographical texts, see Sidonie Smith, ‘Re-Citing, Re-Siting, and Re-Sighting Likeness: Reading the Family Archive in Drucilla Modjeska’s *Poppy*, Donna Williams’ *Nobody Nowhere*, and Sally Morgan’s *My Place’, Modern Fiction Studies*, 40.3 (1994), 509-542. And for the function of family photographs in the context of oral narrative and personal and collective identity formation, see Daniel James and Mirta Zaida Lobato, ‘Family Photos, Oral Narratives, and Identity Formation: the Ukrainians of Berisso’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 84. 1 (2004), 5-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Stefania Lucamante, “The Privilege of Memory Goes to the Women: Melania Mazzucco and the Narrative of the Italian Migration”, *MLN*, Vol.124, no.1 (January 2009), 293-315. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Melania Mazzucco completed a degree in cinema from the Experimental Center for Cinematography. In addition to her novels she has written short stories, and award-winning works for the cinema, theatre, and radio. In 2003, her novel *Vita* obtained the Italian Premio Strega. The same year, the book became a *New York Times Book Review* Editors’ Choice and one of the *Publishers Weekly* Top Ten Books of the Year, the sole foreign work included. *Un giorno perfetto* has been adapted as a film by director Ferzan Ozpetek. In 2012 Mazzucco also published a children’s story entitled *Il bassotto e la regina* (*Plato and the Queen*). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Among critical studies on Mazzucco’s production published at time of writing see: Stefania Lucamante, “Il desiderio perverso e il rovesciamento dello sguardo meduseo in *Il bacio della Medusa* di Melania Mazzucco”, *Italica*, Vol. 76, no. 2 (Summer, 1999), 220-240; Laura Di Nicola, “Il romanzo come ‘genere aperto’: *Lei così amata* di Melania Mazzucco”, *Narrativa*, 20-21 (June 2001), 35-43; Beatrice Ippolito, “Pluralità di generi femminili nel romanzo *Il bacio della Medusa* di Melania Mazzucco”, *Quaderni di cultura italiana. 5. Narrativa italiana recente/Recent Italian Fiction* (Trinity College, Dublin and Trauben: 2005), 135-160; Nicoletta Di Ciolla, “Roma in Noir: The Eternal City as Dystopia. Or Perfect Imperfection”, *Romance Studies*, 25 (4) (2007), 297-311. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Cresswell, *On the Move*, pp. 1-2 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Sartini Blum, *Rewriting the Journey,* p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) pp. 5 and 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Stefania Lucamante, “The Privilege”, p. 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Melania Mazzucco, “Melania Mazzucco dopo *Limbo*: ‘Cerco sempre di narrare figure femminili inquiete’”, Interview with Simona Santoni, *Panorama.it*, 2 July 2012. <http://cultura.panorama.it/libri/melania-mazzucco-limbo-intervista> (last accessed 30 March 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Teresa De Lauretis, “‘Eccentric Subjects’. Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness”, *Feminist Studies*, 16 (1990), 115-150; *Soggetti eccentrici* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), pp. 48-49 and pp. 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Mary Morris, “Women and Journeys: Inner and Outer”, in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel,* 1992), pp. 25-31 (p. 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See, for instance, Annemarie Schwarzenbach who dresses in male clothes and wants to be called Clark while she is in Africa, the androgynous Antar and Azra in *La Camera di Baltus*, and the soldier Manuela in *Limbo*. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Cinzia Sartini-Blum discusses how the “trope of female mobility has given impetus to figures of subjectivity in progress across disciplinary, conceptual , and cultural boundaries”, *Rewriting and Journey,* p.48. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Sartini-Blum, *Rewriting the Journey*, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Visual images, such as paintings and the frescoes in the novel *La camera di Baltus*, are themselves used as a metaphor for fiction and writing. They all narrate life and the rapid succession of events as a sort of “anthology” of existence (*La camera di Baltus* p. 350). For this reason they also become emblematic of the impossibility of capturing life. The extremely detailed writing of Mazzucco too can be seen as an expression of such an attempt to catch every single detail of life, an attempt that – as with the photograph – is destined to fail. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Berger, *Another Way of Telling*, p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Melania Mazzucco, “La contesa con l’ombra”, *Bollettino di italianistica*, 2005, n.1, 171-177, (p.176). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Mazzucco, “La contesa”, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Melania Mazzucco, *Il bacio della Medusa* (1996) (BUR: 2008). *Il bacio della Medusa* is Mazzucco’s first novel set in Northern Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Medusa is a girl born in a very poor peasant family. While still a child she is sold to Peru, a juggler who takes her to France where Medusa will lead a life of wandering, extreme misery and physical violence. Although she falls in love with Peru and enjoys her life of freedom and adventures, once an adolescent Medusa is abandoned and forced to return to Italy. There she is employed as a maid by Norma, Count Argentero’s wife. Norma is a refined woman frustrated by the constraints of bourgeois society and the suffocating control of her husband’s family. She falls in love with the rebel and unconventional Medusa and together the two women undertake a journey back to France in search of freedom and interior peace. Having caused scandal and outrage they are eventually separated with Norma being interned in a mental hospital. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Melania Mazzucco, “La camera oscura della fantasia”, in *Letteratura & fotografia,* ed. byAnna Dolfi, 2 vols (Milan: Bulzoni, 2005), vol. I, pp. 21-32 (p. 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock, eds, *Digital and Other Virtualities. Renegotiating the Image* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Benjamin, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Photography’s capacity to catch and freeze what the naked eye misses has often associated it with the uncanny, the magical and mystical. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)