



She Doesn't Even Know She Made Them: Ambiguous Attribution in Italian Exploitation Films

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Abstract

Starting in the late 1950s, exploitation filmmakers operating in Italy sometimes used pseudonyms, allonyms or *prestanomi*. This article examines the multiplicity of motivations behind this practice, and attempts to untangle some of the implications of the use of pseudonyms in Italian exploitation cinema, especially as it relates to the complex dynamics of gender and nationality in the film production sector. It compares the case of the alias O. Hellman, which appears in a small number of exploitation films in the 1970s, with similar ones from that period, including ones in which the ambiguity of authorial attribution involves husband and wife teams – an ambiguity fascinatingly compounded by the protectionist measures of Italian film policy and the contradictory evidence of primary and secondary sources. Finally, the article reflects on the implications of this practice on data-based gender research in the Italian film industry.

Keywords

gender – nationality – pseudonyms – Italian genre films – film policy – prestanome

In the opening scene of the 1977 jawsploitation film *Tentacles*, a mother momentarily steps away from her baby's stroller in a San Diego seafront park as she sees a friend drive by. After she crosses the street to her friend's van,

the film begins to alternate between tight over-the-shoulder close ups of the women chit-chatting and a slowly advancing long shot of the seafront, where the stroller is gently encased in a frame-within-the-frame formed by a street-light and the top of the van.

A few shots earlier, as we watched the mother playing with her cooing baby by the sea in tight close-up, the film crosscut four times to water-level point-of-view shots of a *something* progressively making its way to shore. Now, the suspense grows with every passing car that blocks our view of the stroller, and is released momentarily as our gaze reunites with it. This *fort-da*, compounded by the cross-cutting and zooming, builds to a crescendo until all we see is the mother’s blurry torso on the right, while a passing school bus blocks the rest of the image for a couple of unbearable seconds. As Stelvio Cipriani’s four-note riff plays the bus off the frame, we discover that the stroller has disappeared (Figs. 1 and 2).

Tentacles was released three years after *Beyond the Door* (1974), producer Ovidio Assonitis’ previous horror film – an *Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973)-slash-*Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) mashup that has been described as ‘one of the biggest US moneymakers from Italy since Fellini’



FIGURES 1 AND 2 *Tentacles* (1977): The stroller disappears.
FRAME GRABS.

(Shipka 2011, 151).¹ *Tentacles*, an Italy-USA co-production, made some money too, although not nearly as much.² Like other exploitation fare from the 1970s, what the two films have in common is the disdain they were met with from contemporary critics. In his review of *Tentacles* for *The New York Times*, delightfully titled 'Squid pro quo', Lawrence Van Gelder (1977) writes:

People who are immune to atrocious acting in minor roles; to occasionally poor dubbing; to a totally unoriginal story; to the sort of sloppiness that allows at least one reference to the octopus as a squid; and to a climactic sequence that looks like feeding time at the aquarium when it is at all intelligible, will cull the exceedingly minor rewards of 'Tentacles' [...].

An eco-vengeance narrative in which a giant octopus takes bloody revenge on humans for disturbing the ocean depths with their grand industrialist projects (in this case, subtly, the digging of an underwater tunnel by a company called Trojan), *Tentacles* reminded even the uninitiated of Steven Spielberg's blockbuster, made a couple of years earlier. In fact, after the release of *Jaws* in 1975, a wave of mockbusters burst onto the international film scene, *Tentacles* being only one of the more prominent examples. Primarily noted for its heavyweight cast of Hollywood veterans (Hunter 2009, 14), which includes Henry Fonda, John Huston and Shelley Winters, the film was lambasted not only by contemporary US-American critics, but by their Italian counterparts, too. The well-respected Davinotti guide (1977) dismisses the film as having special effects that verge on the ridiculous, and a final scene in which the giant octopus is torn to shreds by two trained orcas – a nod to that other 70s blockbuster creature-from-the-sea film – that amounts to 'a confusion of seaweed and whirling waters'.

The director of the film is credited as Oliver Hellman, a pseudonym that reflects the period's relatively common practice of adopting Anglo-sounding names in Italian genre and exploitation film production. The impetus behind this practice is part of the focus of this article. As I will show, three of the main reasons for the use of pseudonyms in Italian genre and exploitation film – to pass a film off as a US product for marketing purposes, to satisfy or circumvent legal, bureaucratic or fiscal requirements, or to dissociate one's name from a particular film product – all merge in the case of Oliver Hellman. Above all,

1 For example, *La Dolce Vita* (1962) made over 3 million dollars at the US box office, 'a figure comparable with the box-office takings of successful US productions' (Tzioumakis 2012, 25).

2 3 million US dollars (Gomarasca 2009, 50). By comparison, *Beyond the Door* made 15 million on a 350,000 budget – 20 million according to Assonitis himself (in Ercolani 2023, 89).

Oliver Hellman is a Russian-doll pseudonym, in which questions of gender, nationality, production modes and film policy coalesce. According to official files, the person behind the pseudonym Oliver Hellman is Sonia Molteni, who is also credited, under her own name, as a screenwriter for *Tentacles* and a host of other films by the same producer. But according to most paratextual and secondary sources, as well as other ephemera, producer/director Ovidio Assonitis, Molteni's husband, is the one hiding behind both Oliver Hellman and Sonia Molteni. Outside of institutional archives, and the odd Italian film credit, Molteni's name disappears.

Here, the case of Sonia Molteni serves as a springboard for an examination of the use of the pseudonym, in its various iterations, and what it might tell us about the complex negotiations of gender and nationality within the production of Italian genre and exploitation films. In its most succinct definition, the infamously slippery term exploitation cinema has been described by Eric Schaeffer (1999) as 'considered to be ethically dubious, industrially marginal, and aesthetically bankrupt' (17). I consider all exploitation films or, as they are also sometimes referred to in Italian, *generi di profondità* (which roughly translates as underground genres) to be genre films. In this sense, I employ the terms genre and exploitation filmmaking throughout the article to convey the fact that the use of pseudonyms (fictional names), allonyms (real people's names) and *prestanomi* (frontmen or women) was not uncommon in exploitation filmmaking, but occasionally also in other genre productions that were closely linked with it, but did not always strictly belong to it.

Although most of my examples are from the 1960s and 70s, the period under consideration here stretches from the late 1950s, with the appearance of the first Italian horror films, through the institution of the Corona film law (1965), and up to the 1994 reform, a period which roughly corresponds with the most diffused use of pseudonyms in Italian film production, and within which Italian exploitation and genre filmmaking was the most prolific.³ The 1970s mark a turning point for exploitation films internationally: Spielberg's *Jaws* is widely considered the first instance of the mainstreaming of exploitation cinema, introducing the gradual phasing out of the original genre (Williams 2018, 299–300).

The article investigates some of the implications of the use of pseudonyms, allonyms and *prestanomi* in Italian exploitation cinema, especially as this ambiguous authorial attribution relates to the nationality and gender of filmmakers. One of these implications concerns historical data collection on gender in the film industry. The article raises questions

3 See Shipka 2011, Baschiera 2016, Parigi 2001, 219.

pertaining to the ways we might be able to construct datasets that highlight the 'noncorrelative aspects of gender' (Hedley and Kooistra 2018), that is, the fact that gender data often defy normative ways of cataloguing. This reflection takes its cue from the methodological challenges encountered during the research project 'A Cinematic Archive for the Future: Women's films in Italy 1965–2015' (CineAF 2020–2022), during which our research team created a database of all Italian feature-length films distributed in Italian cinemas over these five decades, in order to trace patterns of gender inequality in ten professional roles.

The Role of Pseudonyms in Italian Cinema

The occasional practice of using combinations of pseudonyms and allonyms in postwar Italian cinema provides us with a prime example of how production history narratives based on primary data, such as those found in public institutional archives, can be at odds with oral reconstructions of those same histories. Feminist film historians, for example, often foreground such oral histories in order to highlight women's hidden contributions to the film sector (Bell 2021a, Bell 2021b, Barotsi, Dagnino, and Mereu Keating 2023, 11).

At the same time, horror fans are avid producers and consumers of oral histories and other paratextual material surrounding the objects of their cinephilic attention. As Zachary Sheldon (2020) explains, 'the horror genre in particular has nurtured an extensive culture of fans who rabidly enjoy any and all background information on a film that they can get' (25). Compared with other film genres, horror has had a particularly long-lasting relationship with special behind-the-scenes features, dedicated magazines and other paratexts, in which in-depth interviews with directors, screenwriters, make-up artists, and other professionals hold a particularly prominent position (29). Sheldon suggests that the fans' passion for such material is fueled by a desire for comfort and closure triggered by the nature of the genre itself (25). In the case of Italian genre filmmaking, the function of interviews extends to mystery-solving quests to disambiguate the often deliberately convoluted attribution practices that allowed creators to mask behind false names – imagined or real, often multiple.

In such interviews, film practitioners advance several reasons for the use of aliases. The screenwriter Ernesto Gastaldi suggests that in the late 1950s and early 60s, producers would impose English-sounding pseudonyms on filmmakers (in Curti 2015, 67), especially on those with limited bargaining power. According to director Riccardo Fredda, one of the pioneers of the horror

genre, Italian audiences did not think of horror ‘as a genre capable of being produced by their fellow countrymen, so Italian horror filmmakers often used Anglicized pseudonyms to pass off their films as British or American productions’ (in Church 2015, 3).⁴ For Aurelio Crugnola, Freda’s set designer, the pseudonym Joseph Goldman was chosen in order to sell *L’orribile segreto del Dr. Hichcock* (*The Horrible Dr. Hichcock*, Freda 1962) abroad: ‘in fact, critics in Paris said that only the English could have made a film like that’ (in Lucantonio 2001, 27). One of the reasons why Mario Bava adopted the Anglo-sounding name John M. Old was to increase his films’ marketability in Italy. In interviews, he suggests this wasn’t a ‘fad’ but a choice based on the certainty that ‘if in a science fiction or horror film they’d seen Italian names, the public wouldn’t have gone to see them’ (Pezzotta 2013, 43). Italian films made under Anglicised pseudonyms may have also functioned as an ideal compromise for the many smaller rural *seconda* and *terza visione* (second- and third-run) exhibitors whose audiences preferred US products but who could not meet the demands of US distributors (Valenti 2016, 55).

This practice persisted throughout the decades. Whether or not it actually helped such Italian productions appeal to international audiences, they often performed pretty well at the box office. Antonio Margheriti, who made *Il mondo di Yor* (*Yor, The Hunter from the Future*, 1983) under the pseudonym Anthony Dawson, says those were ‘strange times. In the United States, in August 1983, *Yor* [...] earned 2,810,000 dollars, with 1284 copies’ in distribution, more than contemporary mainstream hits like *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983) (in Lucantonio 2001, 38).

According to Laura Parigi (2001), the intuition that the Italians could produce low-budget imitations of US products and ‘win a slice of its market by disguising films produced in Italy as American’ was present in the industry as early as the 1950s (211), and the practice survived for about thirty years. If, as she puts it, ‘the “fake Americans” were only a marketing strategy, they would have been much more short-lived’ (222), but the tricksters and shape-shifters of the Italian film industry were appreciated for being precisely that. Just as a corner of the Roman suburbs could be dismantled and reassembled to look like Texas – as

4 The layers of fiction behind the production of early, gothic-inspired Italian horror films were multiple: Di Chiara (2016) notes that since American distributors, who were crucial for the production mode of ‘60s Italian horror films, ‘apparently considered the grounding of a horror film in a literary tradition as customary, the literary sources of Italian horror films were often completely made up. For instance, *Il mulino delle donne di pietra* (*Drops of Blood*, Giorgio Ferroni 1960) was supposedly adapted from ‘Flemish Tales’ written by a non-existent Pieter Van Weigen, while *I tre volti della paura* (*Black Sabbath*, Mario Bava 1963) came from totally fake sources or from works of authors who did not correspond to the ones announced in the credits’ (37); also see Curti 2015, 50, 98.

in Ferdinando Baldi's *Preparati la bara!* (*Django, Prepare a Coffin*, 1968), which was filmed in the Tolfa ravine) – they were confident that all these layers of counterfeiting enjoyed the complicity of ‘a public that probably knew, but pretended to know nothing’ (223). What's more, despite the English-sounding monikers, these films ‘maintained a strict relationship with other elements of the Italian popular culture of the time’ (Di Chiara 2016, 41), producing *filoni* (cycles) that functioned as ‘localized rewritings of cultural memories propelled outside specific national borders through transnational exchange’ (Church 2015, 4).

Parigi laments that historians of Italian cinema ‘tend to dismiss these pseudonyms by considering them the “vice” of a few filmmakers or, at most, an expedient for capturing the interest of ingenuous spectators,’ (2001, 219) which, as her research shows, underestimates the importance of a strategy employed in hundreds of productions of the period. The reasons for adopting pseudonyms were multiple, and depended on various factors, such as the film genre, decade, target market, and the filmmakers’ bargaining power.⁵ Disambiguating some of the ramifications of their use can shed light on the power dynamics of production practices in the Italian filmmaking sector, and can help us begin to understand the ways in which a protectionist ethno-nationalist film law and a patriarchal culture affected those power dynamics.

An under-discussed reason for adopting pseudonyms, one that often seeps through in interviews with filmmakers, was a sense of snobbery or disdain for the films they produced. In that respect, pseudonyms offered a chance to distance oneself from a product considered sub-par. Antonio Margheriti, alias Anthony Dawson, had originally wanted to use the name Anthony Daisy but was told ‘it sounded off’ (one wonders if this was code for queer). Margheriti hoped to be able to change his alias had he gone on to make ‘more dignified’ films, but he never did, since he ‘continued to make a certain type of cinema that critics did not approve of, although it did well’ (in Lucantonio 2001, 38). Florestano Vancini, who made the western *I lunghi giorni della vendetta* (*Long Days of Vengeance*, 1967) under the pseudonym Stan Vance, draws a clear connection between his feelings about the film and the use of an alias:

I too made a Western *I lunghi giorni della vendetta* [...] but I didn't make it in the real sense; I made it in a sort of technical sense. I'm not responsible for it as its author, but rather in the sense of a professional service that was asked of me and which I supplied. I didn't sign it with my own name but with the pseudonym Stance [sic] Vance, not because I wanted to hide my identity – even if there are a lot of people working in

5 Since it was often producers who imposed such pseudonyms on directors. Ecolani 2024.

the Italian cinema industry, we all know what everybody's doing in any given moment. I didn't sign it because using another name was a way of saying: 'I don't feel responsible for it, I am not its author, it is a confection to which I have devoted my best professional talents.'

In BONDANELLA 2019, 151

In the same collection of interviews, the director Carlo Lizzani provides further insight into this particular function of pseudonyms: in 1966, he made *Un fiume di dollari* (*The Hills Run Red*) under the name Lee Beaver 'for the same reasons that many directors make television advertisements' and because he owed producer Dino De Laurentiis a favour. To make the distinction clear, he adds that a year later he made another western, *Requiescant*, 'which had rather higher pretensions' (Pier Paolo Pasolini has a brief cameo in the film) 'and in fact I put my own name on it' (in Bondanella 2019, 151).

As Di Chiara (2016) succinctly puts it, one of the conditions for the thriving of genres like Italian horror resided 'in the interest demonstrated by foreign distributors and co-producers' (41) – in fact, as he points out, almost all Italian horror productions in the 1960s were picked up by US distributors. But another crucial condition for their existence consisted in 'the risk reduction represented by state aid policies' (ibid.). Protectionist policies and state aid for national film production enshrined in post-WWII laws and consolidated in 1965 with the passing of Law 1213, also known as 'Legge Corona', produced a specific set of circumstances for the Italian film sector that were decisive for the development of certain production cultures – including workarounds that sometimes turned those protectionist regulations to one's advantage. The use of pseudonyms and *prestanomi* was especially useful for such workarounds, as explored in the next section.

Shapeshifters against Film Policy: Pseudonyms or *prestanomi*?

Legge Corona was a set of policies that, with minor modifications along the way, would govern film production for nearly forty years (Zaffanella 2018, 337). The law introduced or strengthened measures that protected and promoted the national industry, especially in the face of Hollywood's dominance. Building on screen quotas and funding schemes for national films instituted by previous frameworks (especially law no. 958 of 1949, also known as 'Legge Andreotti'), Legge Corona included measures for the mandatory programming of feature-length Italian films in theatres for at least 25 days per three months (Law 1213, art. 4). This screen quota lasted until 1994 when the obligation was lifted, and national programming became optional and rewarded with tax incentives (Zaffanella 2018, 338).

But what was required for a film to qualify as Italian? Producers had to submit documents ascertaining their film project's Italian nationality based on strict and specific parameters, including the nationality of cast and crew members, amongst other criteria. A film was considered Italian when it was produced in the Italian language, filmed predominantly in Italy by companies belonging to and managed by Italian citizens, or with Italian-based head offices that conducted the majority of their business in Italy. Additionally, directors had to be Italian citizens, as did the authors of the treatment, as well as the majority of the screenwriters. The rest of the production team was treated in a more wholesale manner: two-thirds of leading and three-quarters of supporting roles had to go to Italians (unless the script justified the hiring of so-called different 'genotypes', a term whose implications are beyond the scope of this article); three-quarters of department heads had to be Italian; while the rest of the technical, administrative and below-the-line crew had to be entirely composed of Italian nationals (Law no. 1213, art. 4).

Such measures had their genesis during fascism and were consolidated in the post-war period, in line with a European-wide effort to protect national production from Hollywood's output (Murschetz, Teichmann and Karmasin 2018, vii; Mereu Keating 2016, 33). But in the 1960s, such protectionist goals clashed with European industrial policy and the unification of the European markets (Regulation 38/64/CEE; Zaffanella 2018, 339). Hence, a subsequent paragraph in Art. 4 of the Legge Corona recognised all other European nationalities as equivalent to the Italian one for the purposes of obtaining the nationality certificate. But this only applied to the cast and below-the-line functions. From 1965 until 1994's Law 153, which introduced further reforms, the director, treatment author and screenwriter were exempt from the European equivalence clause, which meant that those roles had to be taken on by Italian nationals (or majority Italian in the case of screenwriters).

Despite its putative aim to protect the national industry from Hollywood's dominance, the persistence of the Italian nationality clause has been criticised for betraying a political (un)conscious regarding what constitutes 'italianness'. The flipside of the support of local film production in the face of an external threat is the exclusion of film professionals operating in Italy but without access to Italian nationality, which is an issue that haunts Italian cinema to this day (Faleschini-Lerner 2022, 132–133).⁶

In the postwar decades, it was common practice for US companies to circumvent protectionist measures by creating formally Italian companies as

6 Also see AA.VV. "For a Law that Supports Pluralism, Diversity, and Opportunity in the Creative Industries – Petition."; Zanini and De Franceschi 2016; Piredda 2019; Barotsi 2023b.

fronts for US financing (Vitali 2016, 40). But US filmmakers operating in Italy also resorted to practices of falsification to gain access to the benefits of the film laws. According to most sources, the 1963 gothic horror film *Il castello dei morti vivi* (*Castle of the Living Dead*) was directed by Lorenzo Sabatini, alias Warren Kiefer. Yet it was the US-born Warren Kiefer who was hiding behind the Italian pseudonym (an homage to the sixteenth century Italian painter), in order to pass as an Italian citizen and therefore gain access to the benefits of the law (Curti 2015, 115). Paolo Noto (2010) has written about the ‘variety and productivity of falsification in Italian cinema’ during the late 60s. He sees the counterfeiting impulse that traverses both high- and low-brow film production as interweaved with the question of the auteur, especially as it relates to the value of attaching a name to a film product. What Noto calls the ‘onomastic obsession’ therefore manifests itself, in different ways, both in art cinema and genre films of the period: ‘In genre films, the name of the director is often hidden or disguised behind pseudonyms. In productions with more explicit aesthetic ambitions, on the other hand, the signature [of the auteur] carries a lot of value in terms of cultural credibility’ (160).⁷ Andrea Bellavita (2001) suggests that genre and exploitation film – ‘anonymous, pseudonymous, illegitimate, a foundling’ – is the type of film ‘fathers [sic] refuse to give their names to’, be it for marketability (putting on an Americanised or British facade), variability necessitated by an exceedingly fast film production chain (too many films by the same director in one year), or outright ‘artistic shame’ (53). It is here that we run into another layer of the counterfeit: the *prestanome*.

In the decades that run roughly between the adoption of Legge Corona and 1994, it was not only common practice to use pseudonyms, but also *prestanomi*, that is, people who were nominally heads of the creative team but whose actual role in the production process was dubious. Already in the late 1950s this was sometimes the case with coproductions, where, as Pezzotta (2013) explains in relation to Mario Bava’s participation in Raoul Walsh’s *Esther and the King* (1960), ‘the name of a famous foreign director – sometimes a supervisor, other times a mere *prestanome*, as in *The Giant of Marathon* [1959, apparently directed by Jacques Tourneur] – was accompanied by that of an Italian director, to whom the onus of actually staging the film often fell, and whose name was removed from the credits on copies distributed abroad’ (43). Conversely, screenwriter Ernesto Gastaldi ponders whether he did indeed write the script for Antonio Margheriti’s (alias Anthony Dawson) *La vergine di Norimberga* (*The Castle of Terror*, 1963) under the pseudonym Gastad Green, as most reference books suggest, but of which he has no memory; or if his good

7 Translations of excerpts from Paolo Noto’s article are my own.

friend Margheriti suggested they use his name because, 'as producers often did with the Spanish coproductions, where they had to put Spanish names into the film even though they actually were not involved', the producer needed an Italian name on paper (Curti 2015, 101). Finally, in the previous example of *Castle of the Living Dead*, when Warren Kiefer's Italian pseudonym did not suffice to gain access to the benefits of the law, the producers credited the first assistant director, Italian Luciano Ricci, as the film's director, under the anglicised pseudonym Herbert Wise (ibid., 115). Reporting these examples, of course, serves less to unveil the truth and more to highlight the impossibility of unveiling it: as Patricia MacCormack notes about another such example, *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* (1973), supposedly directed by Paul Morrissey but probably co-directed by Antonio Margheriti, whose name disappears from non-Italian distributions of the film: 'Much has been written on the 'authentic' director of this film. Most people agree that the larger part of the film was directed by Paul Morrissey, however [it is my] personal conviction that aesthetically and in reference to the more subtle representation of perversions the film belongs more to Margheriti than Morrissey' (2011).

More than merely a way to secure big international names while retaining access to the national programming quotas and tax breaks (such as avoiding the dubbing tax), *prestanomi* could therefore also function as a creative solution for non-Italian professionals operating in Italy who wanted to obtain the benefits of the Italian nationality certificate. To cite one more example, stateless filmmaker Peter Skerl's 1976 exploitation film *Bestialità (Dog Lay Afternoon)* was nominally directed by *prestanome* Virgilio Mattei (Martucci 2009) and co-directed by Giuliana Gamba (a student of Aristide Massaccesi aka Joe d'Amato who would go on to direct multiple porn films in the 1980s under various pseudonyms, including the cross-gender alias John Costa). The way Skerl's participation in the film was publicly navigated depended on context. In the credits, *Bestialità* was 'A film by Peter Skerl', and the marketing campaign presented him as the director (*L'Unità* 1976, 11). By contrast, all documentation submitted to the Ministry, especially in relation to the request for the Italian nationality certificate, demoted him to the role of co-screenwriter, which, as per the film law, was the only above-the-line function that could be shared by a minority of foreign nationals.

After *Bestialità* obtained the go-ahead for obligatory programming, all sorts of hell broke loose. Although the film had been given the thumbs up by the censorship board, *Bestialità* was seized for obscenity after its premiere in Bolzano. The prosecutor's office made specific reference to the scenes in which two women engage in 'carnal relations' with a dog. The Ministry of Culture demanded clarifications regarding the director's nationality, since the film credits leave room for ambiguity regarding directorial responsibility, and

therefore put into question the film's previously obtained Italian nationality certificate. When officially asked by the Ministry whether the film's director was Peter Skerl, the production company replied that Skerl's name was used only promotionally in order to make use of his claim to fame as a past collaborator of Ingmar Bergman, and that the real director of the film was an Italian national, Virgilio Mattei.⁸ But the levels of falsification are hard to disentangle, as the confusion in paratexts and secondary literature attests: film dictionaries, newspapers and magazines even go so far as to debate whether Peter Skerl ever existed, suggesting the name was Giuliana Gamba's alias (Poppi 2002, 192), or Virgilio Mattei's (*L'Unità* 1977, 9).

When the goal is to retrace the labour dynamics of women's participation in the Italian film industry, the discussion becomes even more complex if the *prestanomi* were not established film professionals with documented careers, like Giuliana Gamba, but people about whom we know little to nothing, aside from pieces of official documentation that may collapse under scrutiny. To further complicate matters, such women were sometimes the Italian wives of foreign nationals operating in the Italian film sector. One example, that of Gabriella Cangini, raises complex questions about the intricate hierarchies of gender and nationality that trouble the visibility/invisibility axis we often use to discuss women's contribution to the film sector, especially in relation to the historical sources at our disposal (data, archival documentation, secondary literature) (Barotsi 2023b). Cangini, who signed all official documents relating to the production of a handful of *mondo* films in the late 1960s and early 70s, completely disappears from the discourse and paratexts surrounding these films. At the same time, the imposing cult figure of Ramiro Arango, the Cuban producer who was married to Cangini, slowly materialises before us in seemingly irrefutable terms as the scope of our collected evidence widens. What counts more? Contracts, applications to the Ministry of Culture, where Cangini figures as director, screenwriter and producer of *Riti segreti* (1970)? Or reviews in *The New York Times*, where Ramiro Arango is presented as the sole creative force behind the film, and she is not even mentioned? Traces in institutional archives, and the comparison of official documentation with Italian and foreign marketing material paint a picture where the possibility that Cangini acted as a *prestanome* becomes real.

As we have seen with previous examples, of course, the fact that one person's signature might be more fiscally convenient than another's does not by itself indicate whether that person was in fact part of the film's production team. The inverse is equally true: the fact that husband-and-wife teams appear on the

⁸ Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Concessione certificato di nazionalità, CF 1-9000.

same film production does not mean that either of them is merely there as a front. It has been amply documented that familial relationships were, and to some extent still are, one of the main gateways into the Italian film industry, especially for women (Missero 2022). Similarly, it has also been consistently demonstrated that sexist assumptions will often lead to an underestimation of the contributions of women, especially when these contributions are tied to the presence of a male family member in close professional proximity. For instance, when it comes to the screenwriting husband-and-wife team of Elisa Briganti and Dardano Sacchetti, who have collaborated with some of the most prominent names in Italian genre filmmaking, texts on the duo often tend to focus more on the husband's talents, and unfounded doubts still circulate as to whether Briganti actually contributed to the work, despite the existence of interviews in which they discuss the details of their collaboration and division of labour (Ercolani 2023b, *A Haunted House Story* 2011).

There are other such examples that straddle the line between rumour and evidence. Did actress Giovanna Lenzi direct *Delitti* (1987), or was it her husband, director Sergio Pastore, who allegedly died of a heart attack at the film's premiere? Was continuity supervisor and actress Olga Pehar the screenwriter on some of her husband Umberto Lenzi's films (Ercolani 2023b)? Finally, as will be discussed more fully in the next section, what was Sonia Molteni's role in the production of the films that, notwithstanding official documentation, are attributed to her husband, cult figure Ovidio Assonitis, and how is this ambiguity compounded by the use of the Americanised pseudonym Oliver Hellman?

The Husbands Problem: Sonia Molteni as Oliver Hellman as Ovidio Assonitis?

- Did you notice, there is often another name in my films, Sonia Molteni. Who is Sonia Molteni?
- Your wife?
- Exactly ... She doesn't even know she's supposedly written these films.

ASSONITIS in GOMARASCA 2009, 18

It was difficult to know what the truth was when it came to Assonitis's reputation, and it was even more difficult to figure out when he was lying and when he wasn't.

FRANCESCO BARILLI in ERCOLANI 2023, 70

There are multiple published interviews with Ovidio G. Assonitis and his collaborators that detail the adventures, controversies, successes and failures of this trickster film producer (Monetti and Pallanch 2024, Ercolani 2023, Gomarasca 2009). Ruggero Deodato apparently only agreed to make a film with Assonitis to see if he could avoid being replaced at ‘the snap of a finger’ like most of the directors Assonitis had worked with (in Ercolani 2023, 69). The question as to who really directed *Piranha 2* (1981), widely known as James Cameron’s debut as a director, has not been resolved to this day.⁹ Assonitis, the film’s executive producer, states that he had to take over as director when the young Cameron proved not to be up to the task. This is a narrative that seems to repeat itself often, with the producer’s hand being forced to get behind the camera because of other people’s supposed incompetence. When Assonitis found out that Terence Young had completed shooting a film called *Le guerriere dal seno nudo* (*The Amazons*, 1973) in Italy, he used Young’s cast, sets, even film title, and beat him to the premiere on a fraction of the star’s budget (Ercolani 2023a, 79). Yet perhaps one of the most infamous stories of this serial falsifier relates to his first international hit, *Beyond the Door* (1974).

Like *Tentacles* after it, *Beyond the Door* rode the wave of a huge blockbuster, William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist*, which had come out the previous year. Despite being criticised as derivative, including plagiarising the possessed protagonist’s trademark 360-degree head spin, the film was a huge success and secured Assonitis a deal with Warner. And yet, in the Italian State Archive’s thick folder of official documents relating to the production of the film, the name Ovidio Assonitis is barely mentioned. A document dated 8th October 1974 containing the full list of cast and crew names presented for the purposes of obtaining the Italian nationality certificate credits ‘Sonia Molteni (alias Oliver Hellman)’ as co-author of the treatment, co-screenwriter, and co-director of *Beyond the Door*, together with Roberto D’Ettorre Piazzoli ‘(alias Robert Barrett)’. Other documents state that the director of the production company ‘A.ERRE CINEMATOGRAFICA’ s.r.l. is ‘Mrs. Sonia Molteni, producer of the colour feature film *Chi sei? Aka Nastro nero in casa Nichols* [aka *Beyond the Door*], and an affidavit registers Oliver Hellman as Sonia Molteni’s pen name.

The entry on Ovidio Assonitis in Roberto Poppi’s dictionary of directors includes a note specifying that the long-held assumption that Sonia Molteni was the one behind the pseudonym Oliver Hellman had ‘proved unfounded’ (2002, 34). In a discussion on the production history of *Beyond the Door*,

9 For more on this, see Barkman 2018, 3–5 and Gomarasca 2009, 51–56. Importantly, one of the explanations regarding why Assonitis wasn’t credited as director on the film has to do with the fact that the deal with the producer Roger Corman was that the film be helmed by a US-American director (Barkman 2018, 4).

executive producer Enzo Doria states that Assonitis directed the film and that 'Sonia Molteni, Ovidio's wife, signed *pro forma*' (in Monetti and Pallanch 2023). At the same time, Sonia Molteni's name, as such, appears in the credits of some of the films produced by Assonitis, usually as co-screenwriter, including in *Tentacles*, and in the *Emanuelle* spin-off *Laure* (1976) – whose complex layers of falsification and pseudonymity deserve a separate investigation. There are also multiple interviews in which Assonitis describes the falsifications of his name directly, as we saw in the epigraph. In a 2009 dossier of *Nocturno* dedicated to Assonitis and including a long interview with the filmmaker, and again in a 2023 interview by Eugenio Ercolani, we get a glimpse into his motivations for this 'onomastic obsession', which spans much of what I have discussed thus far:

If you look closely, in many of the films I produced you often find a female name, Sonia Molteni. Do you know who she is? She's my wife. I don't think she even knows how many films she has supposedly written. It's not that I'm shy or reserved. I think this habit of mine of hiding behind pseudonyms or other people's names is due to a kind of prudery and even a touch of snobbism towards the product. I often considered them beneath me. Plus, there was also a financial aspect. For contractual reasons the authors of the film had to be Italian, and I'm Greek. Not many people know this, but I don't have Italian citizenship.

in ERCOLANI 2023, 78.

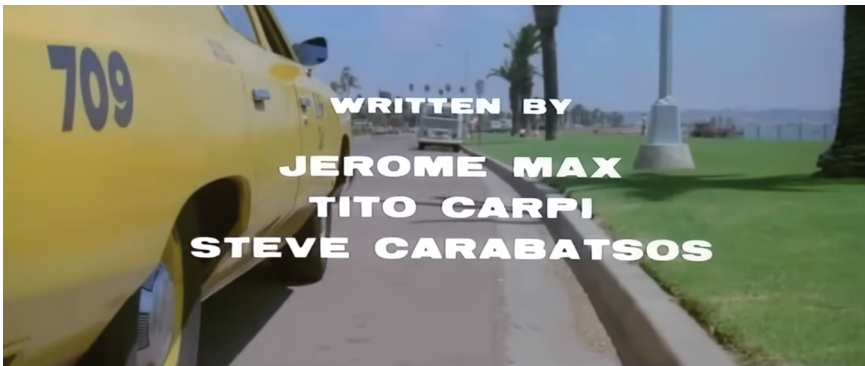
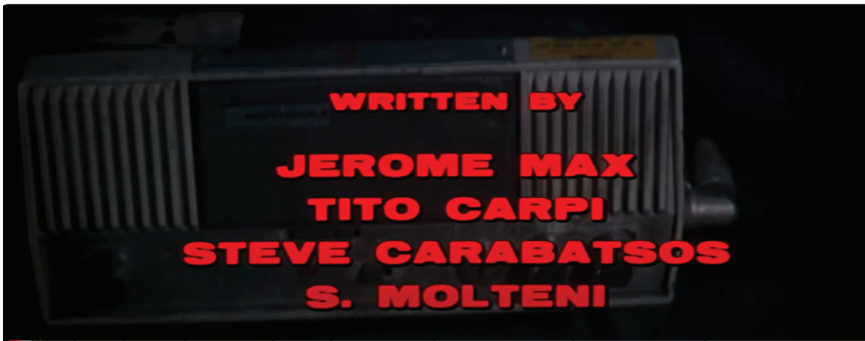
If we take him at his word, what Assonitis is saying here reiterates at least some of the reasons explored in these pages for which a generation of genre filmmakers ventured into the onomastic terrain. Firstly, the disdain for such films, which were often criticised for being sub-par, even when they were making money. Secondly, the question of nationality as defined by a film policy that excluded non-Italian citizens operating in the national context. A third aspect relating to the layers of falsification invoked by Assonitis is the distinction between a pseudonym (hiding behind a fictional name) and an allonym (hiding behind another person's name). In this sense, both Oliver Hellman and Sonia Molteni collapse into Ovidio Assonitis as two avatars, one fake, one real. But the notarised affidavit declaring Sonia Molteni to be Oliver Hellman complicates this further (Oliver Hellman is Sonia Molteni is Ovidio Assonitis). The layers of distancing operated by this onomastic stacking are fascinating; and this is before we stop to consider what it means for a husband to use his wife's name (as an allonym) on films he considers beneath him, and to use her signature for her nationality (as a *prestanome*).

The most telling trace of this operation's gender politics may well lie in the discrepancy between *Tentacles'* Italian, US and Japanese film credits. Whereas the Italian copy of the film lists 'Sonia Molteni' as story author and the first of two screenwriters (the other one is Tito Carpi), the US version includes four screenwriters: the first three are Jerome Max, Tito Carpi, and Steve Carabatsos whereas the last name, Molteni's, is shortened to 'S. Molteni'. This unevenness in the presentation leads one to assume that those who made the decision must have thought a woman's first name would have been comparatively more destabilising. Molteni's name completely disappears in the opening credits of the Japanese version (Figs. 3, 4 and 5). A nearly identical operation is found on the Italian poster for Gabriella Cangini / Ramiro Arango's *mondo* film *Riti segreti*, in which 'Ramiro Arango' is credited as cinematographer and composer (an unusual couple of roles to place prominently on a film poster in the first place), whereas the director credit is attributed to a mysterious 'G. Cangini' (Barotsi 2023b) (Fig. 6). Once we move from the realm of bureaucracy to that of marketing, attribution discrepancies are, as we saw, not rare for this period. But the particular ways in which policy and onomastic play interact do have consequences that specifically impact historically excluded groups, and our ability to account for them, as I explore in the next section.

Data Collection and Queering the Data

The question of attribution, complicated as it is by the use of pseudonyms, allonyms and *prestanomi*, has multiple repercussions for researchers. In this section, I focus briefly on its implications for data-based research on gender inequality in the film industry. As part of the research project CineAF, which took place between 2020–2022, our group collected a large amount of data on Italian feature-length films that had obtained national distribution since 1964, in order to investigate the dynamics of gender inequality in ten offscreen functions within that timeframe, including direction, production and screenwriting (Barotsi, Fanchi and Tarantino 2023; Fanchi, Tarantino and Barotsi 2023).¹⁰ Gender was inferred through probabilistic estimates that

¹⁰ CineAF (A Cinematic Archive for the Future: Women's films in Italy, 1965–2015) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 891966. The project took place between 2020–2022 and was conducted by Rosa Barotsi under the supervision of Mariagrazia Fanchi and with the collaboration of Matteo Tarantino.



FIGURES 3–5

Magic trick: Sonia Molteni's name gradually disappears from the opening credits of *Tentacles* in the Italian, US, and Japanese copies of the film.

FRAME GRABS.

took into consideration pronouns and other gender-indicating terms in the professional's short bio, if such information was available, or the professional's first name, in case it was not (Fanchi, Tarantino and Barotsi 2023, 104).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we encountered very few women directors working consistently or even extemporaneously in the Italian film industry during the 1960s and '70s. For instance, in 1973, we found six film titles directed by



FIGURE 6 *Secret Rites*, by the mysterious G. Cangini.
Promotional poster design by Renato Ferrini.
Author's own collection

women (out of roughly 260 titles): one by Lina Wertmüller (*Film d'amore e d'anarchia* / *Love and Anarchy*), another a majority French co-production directed by Nadine Trintignant (*L'uomo in basso a destra nella fotografia* / *Défense de savoir*), one each by Elda Tattoli (*Pianeta Venere* / *Planet Venus*) and

Maria Virginia Onorato (*L'ultimo uomo di Sara / Sarah's Last Man*) – the only directorial credit either of them will receive during their careers – and two by Gabriella Cangini (*Mi sento topo oca scimmia ...* and *Io credo*). In 1977, the films directed by women are four (out of roughly 175): Liliana Cavani's *Al di là del bene e del male (Beyond Good and Evil)* and Wertmüller's *La fine del mondo nel nostro solito letto in una notte piena di pioggia (A Night Full of Rain)*, Sofia Scandurra's feminist experiment *Io sono mia (I Belong to Me)* – which marks her first and last effort at directing a feature film – and Oliver Hellman / Sonia Molteni's *Tentacles*. What this serves to illustrate is that even if practices of attribution that involve pseudonyms, allonyms, and *prestanomi* were relatively common in this period, a crucial question persists for gender data collection and analysis: if we seriously consider the possibility that Gabriella Cangini, Sonia Molteni and others functioned *only* as tax-relief avatars, how does this affect the ways in which their presence is logged in our datasets? What are the consequences for gender data collection, when, under specific historical circumstances, it can become thinkable that a third or fourth of all women director credits in a year are on shaky existential ground?

More crucially, the onomastic obsession described in this article has consequences that move in multiple directions across time and space, impacting, for example, attribution practices that account for trans and queer professionals (see Barotsi 2023a). The suspicions of onomastic cross-gender falsification I have discussed in relation to Italian genre filmmaking require us to come to terms with the fact that data is not 'transcendent and unambiguous [but] contingent and fluid' (Hedley and Kooistra 2018, 158). Hedley and Kooistra describe how traditional approaches to historical data collection screen out that which exceeds the average, including the correlation between one physical body and multiple social identities, as in the case of artistic avatars and queer identities (163). In this sense, 'what does *not* leave traces in the historical record can be as important as what does, and the interpretive processes that determine historical data's visibility matter as much as what the data convey' (164).

The implications for data-based research on gender in the film industry are multiple. At the very least, the onomastic uncertainty I have traced calls for digital databases on gender to wear their messiness on their sleeve, as it were: to show their situated and labour-intensive production (Losh and Wernimont 2018: xxii-iii; D'Ignazio and Klein 2020), even if it means, or with the added advantage of, sacrificing some of their taxonomic legibility (Ruberg, Boyd and Howe propose linked data as one possible tool in that direction (2018, 122)). As Klein and D'Ignazio put it, those who work with data, especially big data, have to 'actively prevent numbers from speaking for themselves' (2020, 171). Considering context in data-based research is one way to address questions

about the power differentials that lead to absences – or, as in our case, presences – in our datasets that do not speak on their own.

Recent queer and feminist researchers working with inequality data in the film sector have produced careful accounts that caution against a fetishistic view of data as always and necessarily useful (Guyan 2022), or shift the focus from what excluded groups need to do to catch up to what white cis-het men with class privilege need to do to dismantle the exclusionary structures they are largely responsible for (Verhoeven et al. 2020). The article's contribution to this critical approach to the use of film data is twofold. On the one hand, as the cases of Molteni and Cangini suggest, it makes clear that the practice of pseudonym adoption in Italian exploitation film requires a closer look. On the other hand, and as a consequence, it shows that reflections on how to log pseudonyms, allonyms, *prestanomi*, and the figures hiding behind them can act as a Trojan horse that further pushes for a wholesale reconsideration of binary gender data collection, a process that has begun, but still has a long way to go.¹¹

The goal of this article has not been to prove whether and to what extent women like Molteni or Cangini contributed to the productions that have their names all over them, but to point to a potential reading of ambiguous attribution practices in Italian cinema as (also) a site of the patriarchal and ethno-nationalist dynamics of the Italian film industry¹² and its policy ecologies, and, by extension, to the ways in which they have affected and continue to influence both formal and informal production cultures.

Shelley Stamp has famously suggested that feminist film historiography 'must trace the shapes defined by women's absence' (2015, 11). Taking a cue from the deftness with which horror film tropes pair invisibility with agency – just think of the visually absent sea monster looming over the opening scene of *Tentacles* – this investigation into the magic tricks of the onomastic playground has similarly proceeded by cross-cutting between conflicting evidence to trace the uncertain, but imposing shape of pseudonymity.

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¹¹ See, for instance, the conference 'Beyond the binary variable: feminist quantitative analyses of gendered inequalities' held at CRASSH, Cambridge, on September 21, 2021, available at: <https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/29787/>.

¹² In terms of representation, see the seminal work of Gaia Giuliani on various aspects of the intersecting biases of gender and race in Italian visual culture (Giuliani 2018).

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