**Imperfections of the Familiar:**

**A Psychoanalytic Reflection on ‘*Perfetti Sconosciuti*’**

**(*Perfect Strangers*)**

I start with a brief synopsis of the film’s story, but only after confessing to my dissatisfaction with the deliberately contrary title of this presentation. Given all that which startles us in the film, the suggestion that the film tells about imperfections of the most familiar people in our lives is an understatement. It does not adequately capture the essence of that to which we, as viewers, and the characters in the film, are exposed. Nevertheless, I will address a few important points in this short psychoanalytic reading of *'Perfetti Sconosciuti*'.

A married couple – Eva, a psychotherapist, and Rocco, a plastic surgeon - invite their friends, two married couples and a recent divorcee to a dinner party at their home. The interior setting is a spacious and finely furnished flat that clearly conveys the dwelling of a comfortable middle class family (those amongst you who are more familiar with Italy’s socio-cultural aspects of life could add more to this during our discussion). During this supposedly cosy late evening, they also watch the eclipse of the moon. We soon discover that the eclipse turns out to be a symbolic event mirroring a dangerous possibility of a dark shadow being cast over the conviviality of the company and the brightness of their friendships. Soon, we also feel that the much anticipated but late arrival of Peppe, disappointingly without his new girlfriend, also spells an omen for the evening. Similarly, the complex dynamics which emerge at the beginning of the film between the teenager Sofia and her parents, especially her mother Eva give an edgy start to the film. A game is proposed as an entertaining accompaniment to the various courses of the meal. With some reluctance, they agree to put their personal mobile phones – their individual interior ‘black boxes’ - on the table and openly to share in the group all calls, incoming texts, photo and voice messages. These come thick and fast and ruin the evening.

Eventually, the exterior closeness and familiarity of the group, as well as the intimacy of the atmosphere which initially develops, shatter and disintegrate into distance and estrangement leading ultimately to the complete collapse of relationships between the couples and the friendships between all. Or, do they?

Well, the creative writing team of co-writer Paola Mammini and director Paolo Genovese offers us a tantalising possibility of just such an outcome in this deceptively simple plot and I will refer to this later. In actuality, the complexities which emerge during the evening reveal unbearable and painful truths about the reality of the secret and parallel lives of all individuals. The story unravels rapidly with exposure of deceit, lust, passion, intrigue, betrayal, devastation, distress, regret, rage, hurt, prejudice, loneliness and despair - though not necessarily in that order. As viewers, we feel increasingly anxious, worried and stunned by all this but, do we also allow ourselves to be deceived by the ***exterior*** presentations at the beginning? I would say they are full of some unsettling pointers to the ***interior*** reality.

The film starts with our seeing a couple, Bianca and Cosimo, being playful and intimate with each other as they get ready to leave. Yet, during their car journey, do we not sense that something is amiss? We also witness the difficult dynamics and painful process of separation between an anxious and controlling but insecure mother and her adolescent daughter. Sofia is in the full throes of exploring and experimenting with her sexuality and potential sexual life. There is a painfully palpable atmosphere in which the margin between boundary setting and intrusiveness become blurred. However, do we not really feel that for the mother, Eva, this confrontation is laden with anxiety, fear and guilt which stem from another interior source? In another scene, we see a family in the exterior of an ordinary homely setting with a grandmother and children. The mother hurriedly sends off her children to bed before the parental couple, Carlotta and Lele, make their way to the dinner engagement. Then, we see the father sitting on the toilet making a hasty but secret call on his mobile phone. Also, just as they are about to leave, the mother returns quickly to their bedroom to remove and put away her underwear. Do they not give us a clue to a hidden rift between them? How about that brief but anxiety provoking and taunting joke about Bianca not being one of the gang? What do we make of the reference in the conversation between these friends about the affair of their friend Diego and text message that caused his family to break up? Are the congeniality and joviality which pervade the atmosphere just an exterior cover to the dark and disturbing possibilities which lie beneath?

The evening certainly flows well with wine, capers, olives, mascarpone sauce, fried zucchini flowers and gnocchi but, I would suggest that we are also fed some other less appetising starters right from the beginning of the film. One of these is the series of jokes which are made with the best intentions of humour and fun but which strike us with notes of anxiety.

I will not refer to all of these, but just to refresh your memories, the topics include surgery for breast augmentation, the reference to Barbie and Ken – plastic with no balls, the computer guy by the name of Steve Jobs, the exercise App on the mobile phone, the goodnight photos, a so-called five star rest home for the mother-in-law and the issue of seeing a therapist and not a prostitute. I will start my brief psychoanalytic reflection on ‘Perfetti Sconosciuti’ with this last point about jokes. It was Freud’s argument that jokes gave us much pleasure by allowing us to communicate, that is to say exteriorise, the aggressive, cynical thoughts and emotions we hold in our deepest unconscious. He pointed to the centrality of sexual aggression in suggesting that “*a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled*” (Freud, 1905).

Another closely related but a more pivotal element in the narrative structure of the film is secrets. Many in this film are oedipal secrets. Why do we keep secrets even, or especially, from our dearest and nearest? To protect them and to protect ourselves would only be one answer given by the film, but the story here imploringly asks us, the viewers, another question. Are we, in the end, really able to keep secrets from our loved ones? Once again, Freud observed, *“He that has eyes to see and ears to hear can convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore*” (Freud, 1905).

In referring to secrets between couples, Freedman suggested that couples construct secrets in an attempt to draw lines of autonomy and create distance by withholding knowledge, fantasies, wishes, or behaviour (Freedman, 1998). Pincus and Dare, in their groundbreaking study of secrets in the family, emphasised that all marriages have secret contracts reflective of unconscious needs and desires (Pincus and Dare, 1968). But as the film shows the maintenance of secrets comes at a high price. As Ferenczi remarked, “*every secret that has to be kept is a burden*” (Ferenczi, 1949). At a previous film festival on ‘*Secrets*’, I stressed that secrets which contain intense emotional charge and pose potentially serious danger to the order of the individual’s psychic organisation, naturally have a precarious and threatening quality to them (Navaratnem, 2013). Cosimo’s and Eva’s affairs and Peppe’s homosexuality are two of the many examples of such secrets in the film.

However, as Andrea Sabbadini told us on Thursday night during the opening of this festival, the forward slash in the title of this film festival, ‘*Interiors/Exteriors’* refers to a separation as well as a connection between these two spatial aspects.

In that connection, we may usefully employ Winnicott’s formulations of the true and false selves to make more sense of the dilemmas faced by all the characters in the film. According to him, while the ‘False Self’ defends the ‘True Self’, the ‘True Self’ is nevertheless acknowledged “*as a potential and is allowed a secret life*” (Winnicott, 1960). Ulanov, referred to another aspect of this divide by delineating the inner world as remote and unreal compared to the tangible world around us. She wondered if people often failed to see the connection between their psychic attitudes and their outer actions, because inner and outer aspects of their selves and their world are rent apart and alienated. She wrote that “*The estrangement of our inner lives and our outer participation in our society is fundamental because it applies to all. We all suffer to some degree from a sense that what goes on inside us is partitioned off from what goes on outside us. The people around us are often the first to suffer from the unacknowledged stranger within us*” (Ulanov, 1974). I think this last comment applies especially to those closest to us in our lives.

At the beginning of this presentation, I commented that in giving us an end to the film which stood contrary to the trajectory of the narrative line, the makers of ‘*Perfetti Sconosciuti*’ presented a tantalising opportunity to imagine what would have happened to the couples and friends. ***If*** the ‘Black Box’ game had proceeded, the characters would have exposed and shared their private feelings, thoughts, fantasies, states of mind and actual acts - all of which were compartmentalised as secrets contained in their inner world. Such an outcome would have fundamentally transformed and signified important turning points in their lives as well as their relationships with each other. Of course, we know that the characters did not embrace this possibility, as we don’t often do in our lives. The opportunity passes and their lives, just as our lives, carry on as before. The defences are reinstated and the characters, and all of us, are reassured, falsely in fact, that all is well. The ***interior*** is protected and the ***exterior*** is maintained. We may say that it is the nature and function of human defences. At the end of the evening after all their guests are gone and when Eva asks why he did not want to play the game, Rocco remarks “*because we are breakable*”.

In saying this, he is not only referring to the fragility of our characters and personalities but also, by implication, the precariousness of our relationships and our social structures of friendships.

As a psychoanalyst, I find there is so much to learn from this film and to fertilise the work in our consulting rooms. As Busch proposed, one way to conceptualize psychoanalysis is that, at any one moment, there are many strangers in the room. The patient is a stranger to many parts of himself. “*In a successful analysis, the patient continues to bring in new parts of himself that are strangers to the analyst. Inevitably, the analyst also finds himself discovering aspects to which he has been a stranger in the analysis*” (Busch, 2006).

For the record, I wanted to state that the scenes in which Sofia calls her father Rocco to ask for advice and guidance about her anxiety about having sex and his brief responses to her and, the final scene in which Peppe declares that “I’m the one who’s the fag but you are the ones who came out” were my favourite one. I found them very poignant. However, you may have read in the Eidos magazine in your folders that, our chair, Rossella Valdre, has suggested “*The commercial success of ‘Perfect Strangers’ is not mostly attributable to the reflexions it stimulates, but rather to the ‘human factor’ which seduces and blinds the viewers*” (Valdré, 2017). I will leave that for you, the viewers, to ponder about alongside the many issues which I have not addressed in this short paper. Amongst others, these include Gender Politics, Homosexuality, the increasing centrality of modern technology in social communication and Italy’s socio-cultural aspects of life, which is the exterior setting to this fascinating and intriguing possibility of the emergence of the interior.

Those of you, who may be avid fans of the London theatre, would know about the two popular plays currently running in the West End, 'The superlative beginning' and 'The end of hope'. Both deal with aspects of risks involved in exposure, intimacy and honesty in relationships. Perhaps, *'Perfetti Sconosciuti*' is part of a modern cultural trend to examine the vicissitudes of human tendency to conceal part of its true but frail nature: Our propensity for splitting and denial and the defences we employ against the resultant anxiety. The film vividly portrays all of these issues through the insidious anxiety and psychological tension which build up as the story unfolds.

Here, and for all this, we have to be thankful to director Paolo Genovese and co-writer Paola Mammini for providing us with such an engaging and entertaining multi-layered tragicomedy with depth and a lightness of touch.

Film

*Perfetti Sconosciuti* (2016). Written by Mammini, P. et al. and directed by Paolo Genovese. Lotus Production.

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