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Manuela Gieri

Landscapes of Oblivion and Historical Memory in the New Italian Cinema¹

Le forme del tempo sono legate alle forme della memoria, e queste, a loro volta, sono connesse alle strutture essenziali della comunicazione in cui la memoria si esprime.

(Vidali 187)

In closure of the selected proceedings of a seminar held in 1984 by the Cultural Association "Dora Markus" on the forms of time and memory in contemporary culture, Paolo Vidali sets the premises on which to build his engaging hypothesis on contemporary temporal forms. In his argument he attempts to find an answer to compelling questions such as: "Esiste, una temporalità propria della comunicazione caratteristica del nostro secolo, quella di massa?" and "Che storia, o che narrazione, si sviluppa a partire da una comunicazione che usa il linguaggio audiovisivo e la memoria elettronica?" (187). Vidali moves from several assumptions, the primary of which being that our time is characterized by an awareness of the intentional structure of time, thus its non-linearity, and its plurality and transformism in accordance with the diverse cultural contexts.² Today memory has transformed as well: not only does memory articulate itself in the form of time, but time is also shaped by the mnemonic act (Vidali 186). Vidali then raises another question closely linked to those mentioned above, "Possiamo allora generalizzare quanto detto nel sostenere che il tempo si lascia informare dal linguaggio in quanto esso dà significato alla memoria, individuale e collettiva?" (187). He continues by observing that, if it is true, as Walter Benjamin maintained, that history is born together with meaning in human language (Benjamin II.1: 139), then we can postulate that the plurality of languages becomes the index of a plurality of the temporal forms. Thus, the genesis of new communicative techniques generates new temporal forms. It seems to me that were we to match these questions with Jean Baudrillard's

¹ This essay is an extension of the last chapter in my *Contemporary Italian Filmmaking*, entitled "The New Italian Cinema: Restoration or Subversion?," and of a paper I delivered at the annual meeting of the American Association for Italian Studies in 1997. Only brief passages are here reported *verbatim*. This is part of a work in progress on memory and oblivion in the history of Italian cinematic narrative.

² On this issue, see Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*.

observations on the present as the time of simulation and thus of the triumph of the *simulacra* (*Simulations*), they would become even more engaging and compelling. We would perhaps discover that the place of *simulacra* is the locus of a serial, unending memory, and thus of a contemporary interpretation and, most importantly, representation of *oblivion*. Such a peculiar and contemporary mnemonic act stands, quite clearly, in sharp contrast to *historical memory*.

In the age of repetition, seriality, unending present, it is compelling to reconsider both time and space as contemporary culture proceeds to their re-negotiation and re-territorialization, and thus to their thorough and global redefinition and repositioning.³ Once we recognize the intentional nature of time and thus accept the plural form of description as a qualifying trait of contemporary culture, it is evident that our narratives must readdress the issue of space as well.

It is within this particular perspective that a fruitful consideration of a relevant segment of contemporary Italian filmmaking can be exerted. As Italian society experiences significant transformations due to endogenous and exogenous causes, a considerable segment of Italian cinema proceeds to a thorough reassessment and/or re-negotiation of space. Time is then reconsidered in its inner organization as well as in its outer relational structure. Thus, in general terms, much of Italian contemporary cinema is engaged in the evaluation of the ways in which we now acquire, describe, and represent time as they are closely linked to the thoroughly distinct temporality of our age. Consequently contemporary Italian cinematic narratives often proceed not only and simply to a "re-territorialization" of past and history, and thus of time, but also to a re-negotiation of space which is now frequently taken as an a-historical or meta-historical by-product of a serial and/or plural memory.

In Italy the process that brought to a new spatio-temporal paradigm began, I believe, in the early 1970s, when the country experienced a wild inflation and a profound social malaise and terrorism.⁴ The year 1973 may be taken as a watershed, since, for instance, in that year Nanni Moretti turned twenty and experienced his cinematic *début* with a short film in color and Super 8, *La sconfitta* (*The Defeat*) and Federico Fellini made *Amarcord*. With this film Fellini offers to the history of Italian cinema and to that of an entire country, his personal revisitation of the postwar years in a typical Italian small town as well as his personal reflection on memory. The Rimini one finds in *Amarcord* is not simply an autobiographical fragment, but it is part of a past which is constantly

³ On the issue of "re-territorialization" in contemporary Italian cinema, see Degli-Esposti.

⁴ For a contribution to the study of the relationship between Italian cinema and history, see Di Giammatteo, particularly the chapters "1973-1082: gli anni dell'ansia" (347-96) and "1983-1990: gli anni della stasi e del rumore" (397-449). See also Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, especially the chapter "Il paesaggio della catastrofe" (426-67) and "La crisi più lunga" (468-85) in volume 4.

invented, adulterated and manipulated in the act of remembering, as the director often declared with self-awareness and clarity.

Only one year later, in 1974, Ettore Scola, a director who consciously operated the productive merging and contamination between *auteur* cinema and genre film, realized *C'eravamo tanto amati* (*We All Loved Each Other So Much*). Significantly, with this movie Scola placed the past, or, rather, the mythical past of neorealism at a distance that would finally allow its overcoming. Scola's film ends with the Italian exclamation "Bo," a tiny word, apparently insignificant but potentially menacing, uttered by Antonio, a character who, in the preface to the closure of the tale, seemed to have "won," over the others, the woman, the country as well as the act of enunciation. Yet, Antonio's last "meaningful" utterance, "Bo," is a fairly ambiguous act of enunciation. Obviously it does not have a transparent extradiegetic referent. Conversely, it points at an internal referent as it is a syllable *dense* with meaning, and, as it was noted, it bears the echo of Pasolini's *Uccellini e uccellini* (*Hawks and Sparrows*, 1966). When quoting president Mao, the crowd/Pasolini wonders and then answers, "Dove va l'umanità? . . . Boh." Yet, while Pasolini's meditation crossed the national boundaries and unequivocally moved in the territory of Utopia, Ettore Scola's investigation is entirely inscribed within the search for a national *Weltanschauung* largely contained in the history of the Italian left as it is expressed by the history of the Italian Communist Party. Thus in Scola's film the little word is a reflection of a double ambiguity: that of reality and that of its filmic image, that of time—past and/or present—and that of its representation, its "messa in forma." Such ambiguity is the sincere declaration of impotence in face of reality by one of the most influential representatives of the old generation. This impotence is due to the inability to propose a collective memory of the past and at the same time to delineate a viable process of personal and collective identification. Such inability was one of the primary causes of the excruciating crisis Italian cinema experienced in the 1970s.

Yet, to the fathers' inability to recompose a national identity and to trace personal and collective processes of identification and thus memory, corresponded an inability of the children to propose workable alternatives. As Lino Micciché once stated, the generation that came of age in filmmaking in the 1970s was largely a generation of "orphans," synchronically and diachronically.⁵ In a condition marked by the painful absence of forceful and inspiring father figures, the generation of the 1970s found itself without a past and thus without a history through which to be able to interpret the present and on which to build the future.

One must note, however, that for those young directors who moved in the 1980s and 1990s finding maturity, and often a voice of their own, meant that the

⁵ "Gli eredi del nulla. Per una critica del giovane cinema italiano" (Montini 254).

past would be largely "occupied" by terrorism, whose history can hardly become part of a collective memory. Such inability, and perhaps impossibility, to rework the history of terrorism into a personal and collective tale of the past is demonstrated by the unconvincing attempts to address it on the screen, from Gianni Amelio's *Colpire al cuore* (*Aim at the Heart*, 1982) to Mimmo Calopresti's *La seconda volta* (*The Second Time*, 1995), a film produced and interpreted by Nanni Moretti. Both films are fine cinematic tales as well as accurate reflections of their time's inability to make sense of the troubled and troublesome *anni di piombo*. For the generation of those who came of age in filmmaking in the 1970s, the present was unfortunately the time of removal of that past, and largely an age of celebration of the so-called *edonismo reaganiano* in the years of Bettino Craxi's leadership of the country.

During a time characterized by filmic tales confined in closed and silent worlds—an almost aphasic cinema—starting at the end of the 1970s but decisively in the 1980s, a group of directors began working in a new direction gaining very little recognition from audience and critics. They constituted a considerable number of fabricators of images and true cinematic stories that, however, did not represent a group, for they displayed notable generational, ideological, and largely cultural differences. Yet they undoubtedly had a common project even though they never said so. They all aimed at retrieving a shared gaze in the present, at staging the crisis of the subject and of its ability to remember, at openly questioning the very notion of identity—personal and collective/national—moved by the need for a new cultural solidarity, for what has been defined *una nuova resistenza*, a new resistance (Brunetta 1991, 389).

In the conclusive sequence of *Lisbon Story*, one of Wim Wenders' journeys in the labyrinthine territory of memory, the director Manoel de Oliveira states that "Memory is the only true thing. But memory is an invention." In the age of mass communication one must acknowledge the fictional substance of memory, its ability to invent and thus create or, rather, recreate the past. The only "true" past is yet only and simply the one we are capable to remember. The rest remains caught up in the claustrophobic debate between true and false in which the various generations of witnesses clashed. One must then acknowledge that much of contemporary Italian cinema is no longer engaged in such debate. In the Italian cinema that developed in the 1980s, as Mario Sesti writes, "la macchina non acquista mai la presenza di un testimone (e tantomeno di un protagonista), preferisce identificarsi in una parete, un corridoio, un soprammobile" (1994, 9) or a tree, a stone; that is, an object which records the events somewhat "impassively," or rather, with a signifying absence of emotion. Remarkably, it is also a cinema literally obsessed with memory, with the past, with history, even though in new and "postmodern" ways.

In the 1990s, there are, however, directors who try different avenues. Either they represent the emptiness and homologation with distress and uneasiness or with a utopian desire to escape; namely, directors such as Silvio Soldini and

Gabriele Salvatores. Others even try to resist and, indeed, oppose the proliferation of emotionless images of contemporary time and space, by such directors as Nanni Moretti and Gianni Amelio. In different and yet complementary ways, these directors now try to retrieve an "historical" gaze onto reality; it is a gaze filled with emotion, and charged with awareness and empathy. This seems the path cinema has to travel to recover its "cinematographic" quality in the time of mass-media imaging and *simulacra*.

Pierre Sorlin, who has investigated the relationship between cinema and history, has also explained the relationship between the past and its representation, that is, its "messa in forma in una storia" ("shaping into a story") through a mnemonic operation.⁶ One ought to remember that such mnemonic operation is ultimately an inventive and creative activity producing fictional works. Furthermore, such awareness must be matched by the understanding that any "messa in forma" is necessarily due to displacement and conversion through instruments—language or image—ruled by precise and specific technical and syntactical obligations (Sorlin, *La cinepresa e la storia* 9). Moreover, such "messa in forma" is a mandatory premise to any discussion of the relationship between cinema and history. Sorlin thus maintained that in both literature and cinema historians fabricate texts (*La cinepresa e la storia* 8); yet, as he had previously observed, "la finzione e la storia reagiscono costantemente l'una sull'altra" (Gori 186). Within this specific perspective, a film can be taken not only as an invented text but also as a fragment of reality, thus itself a piece of history. In so doing cinema is nothing but "storia di molte storie" with a mostly labyrinthine form in which both film and screen must be considered as "i luoghi unici e privilegiati della ricerca."⁷ As Gian Piero Brunetta maintains, it is also necessary to remember that "Il cinema è, anzitutto, fonte storica per la conoscenza del periodo in cui è stato prodotto. La sua ricostruzione del passato è soprattutto maschera e metafora del presente" (*La cinepresa e la storia* 30).

And yet, cinema is a product of its time and is thus instrumental to an understanding of its internal dynamics; at the same time, it is a reflection and a mirroring, at times deforming, of that time itself. Furthermore, in the reconstruction of the past that cinema enacts, one reads a twofold tension toward both the masking and the metaphorizing of the present. During the twentieth century, it occurs increasingly more in the cinema, rather than in literature, that the traces of collective dreams and memories are deposited and organized most

⁶ Here I especially refer to his essay "Storia e cinema: tra immagini e realtà" (*La cinepresa e la storia* 8-16). During the years, Sorlin has repeatedly written on this topic. All his essays, including his canonical study published in English as *The Film in History. Restaging the Past* (1980) and in Italian as *La storia nei film. Interpretazioni del passato*, are unquestionably precious for the investigation of the relationship between cinema and history.

⁷ Brunetta, "Il cinema come storia," *La cinepresa e la storia* 30.

insistently (Brunetta, *La cinepresa e la storia* 30). In the immediate aftermath of World War II, this cinematic effect translated into a tension to the founding of a new national identity of the Italian people. In Italy cinema lost such function of container and fabricator of the collective imagination in the 1970s, and precisely starting in 1976 with the legalization of private networks. At that time television irreparably and forcefully dethroned cinema. As Brunetta observed, in the late 1970s and then in the 1980s an increase in film consumption through television and video was matched by a decrease in cinema's role in the shaping of a collective imagination. "Il tempo del cinema, che nel dopoguerra si apriva e poteva aiutare nella costruzione di mondi possibili e di nuovi orizzonti di attesa, si sintonizzava con i ritmi e la volontà di ricostruzione del paese, sembra ora restringersi a imbutto e dà l'impressione di essere un 'tempo morente'" (1995, 2:379)

Thus, it is in the 1970s that Italian cinema entered its most painful "crisis." During that crucial decade, the past in general and the history of the Resistance in particular—a history that had experienced alternate vicissitudes in the various representations cinema had given it in the aftermath of the war—progressively disappear in the texts of the new Italian cinema. Such cinema was the expression of a generation which was then in its twenties. The young Italian cinema was moving its first timid steps towards maturity and was living in the present of a minimalist daily reality or in an asphyxiating temporality "without history." Unable to tell stories, to transcend the claustrophobic boundaries of solipsistic autobiographical tales, this cinema mumbled or literally lost its voice and reached aphasia. Later on, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the young Italian cinema seemed to be retrieving a taste for fabulation and storytelling and thus for memory. Once the obsessive presence of the narrating subject that dominated both genre film and *auteur* cinema in the postwar years had faded, the *récit* became the territory of a no longer monologic and linear memory. Conversely, cinema is now the territory of a memory that is fragmented and poly-discursive, as labyrinthine and complex as the reality of a country without economic and political, as well as cultural and ideological certainties.⁸

Let us recall our introductory quotation from Paolo Vidali's essay entitled "I linguaggi della memoria e le forme del tempo nella cultura contemporanea": "Le forme del tempo sono legate alle forme della memoria, e queste, a loro volta, sono connesse alle strutture essenziali della comunicazione in cui la memoria si esprime" (Barbieri and Vidali 187). It seems to me that by finding answers to the intriguing questions posed by Paolo Vidali in his conclusive

⁸ See Micciché, *Schermi opachi. Il cinema italiano degli anni '80*, and also his "Gli eredi del nulla. Per una critica del giovane cinema italiano" (Montini 251-58). See also Sesti, *La "scuola" italiana. Storia, strutture e immaginario di un altro cinema (1988-1996)*; Zagarrò, "The Next Generation. Giovane e nuovo cinema" (*Cinema italiano anni novanta* 9-15).

remarks, one would find a new way to draft the map of the Italian cinema developing in the late '70s. In my *Contemporary Italian Filmmaking*, I suggest 1978 as the year of birth of a "new Italian cinema" (203). Such cinema has now reached full maturity in the works of such directors as Nanni Moretti and Gianni Amelio but also Gabriele Salvatores and Maurizio Nichetti, while other and again "new" cinematic discourses are developing in the works of such directors as Silvio Soldini and Giuseppe Piccioni. By using the adjective "new," I was then and am now referring to a cinema that decisively freed itself from the burden of imitation and the anxiety of influence in relation to the grand cinema of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in its neorealistic, and later *auteuristic* and generic expressions. To rephrase Vidali, one wonders which is the kind of story or narrative, and indeed the kind of temporal and spatial organization that develops in the cinema by moving from a mass communication that uses audiovisual language and electronic memory. The words with which Italo Calvino concludes his "Autobiografia di uno spettatore" seem prophetic:

Il cinema della distanza assoluta che aveva nutrito la nostra giovinezza è capovolto definitivamente nel cinema della vicinanza assoluta. Nei tempi stretti delle nostre vite tutto resta lì, angosciosamente presente; le prime immagini dell'eros e le premonizioni della morte ci raggiungono in ogni sogno; la fine del mondo è cominciata con noi e non accenna a finire; il film di cui ci illudevamo di essere solo spettatori è la storia della nostra vita.⁹

(xxiv)

The distance which was a response to and a reflection of a need for a widening of the boundaries of the real ("dilatazione dei confini del reale"), a need for incommensurable territories, almost "entità geometriche, ma anche concrete, assolutamente piene di facce e situazioni e ambienti, che col mondo dell'esperienza diretta stabilivano una loro rete (astratta) di rapporti" (Calvino 1974, xviii), has faded. We now live in the time of absolute "proximity," of faceless and anonymous landscapes, the time of repetition and simulation, the time of *simulacra*.

There are three fundamental ways in which contemporary Italian cinema seems to be responding to such generalized loss of centrality, integrity, and unified meanings characteristic of contemporary landscapes. One needs to reflect on and/or represent the repetition, seriality, and the unending present of the time and space of *simulacra*, and thus produce "oblivious narratives" that are the by-products of an unending and serial memory. The second is to find new ways of "resistance," new avenues to a contemporary form of historical awareness of the present, if not of the past. Yet a third and last venue is a

⁹ Calvino's piece has been also published as a preface to the new edition of Fellini's *Fare un film*.

decisive if not thoroughly organized form of opposition to the seriality and homologation of televised and virtual reality. Here I might suggest Silvio Soldini and Gabriele Salvatores as diverse and yet complementary representatives of the first mode of filmmaking. Their cinema testifies to a renewed, even though diversely interpreted, urge to use the topos of the journey, totally abandoned by the cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In his earlier films, from the first *Paesaggio con figure* (*Landscape with figures* 1983) to *L'aria serena dell'Ovest* (*The Serene Air of the West* 1990), Silvio Soldini stages an urban landscape characterized by an insecure and uneasy human or, rather, social territory. Fragmentation, interference, repetition, and chance characterize a "deserted" landscape populated only by *replicantes* no longer human and not yet fully rounded characters. As Gianni Canova suggests, "Silvio Soldini si colloca nell'orizzonte estetico ed epistemologico della contemporaneità, nella misura in cui mette in scena, già a partire dal suo primo film, la preminenza del paesaggio su quel che un tempo era (e su quel che Soldini cerca di far tornare ad essere) il personaggio."¹⁰

Yet, another topos traverses Soldini's cinematic production: the journey. From his early films, where characters only try to exit the norm of daily routine, to *Un'anima divisa in due* (*A Split Soul* 1993) and *Le acrobate* (*The Women Acrobats* 1997), in which the protagonists leave their homes, their cities, and their job, to travel in a space truly "other" from their own, "lo scarto della dimensione temporale"—as Canova writes—"si accompagna a un'analoga e complementare dislocazione nello spazio." Thus Soldini's cinema is overall characterized by a "modalità di 'messa in movimento' della storia" (*Schermi opachi* 195). Yet, it is with *L'aria serena dell'Ovest* that Soldini closes a decade bringing to full circle what was earlier simply the mapping of an asphyctic, silent, and claustrophobic urban space:

Con lucida intuizione, Soldini disegna i confini di un mondo saturo di canali mediatici e di attrezzi per comunicare in cui però, paradossalmente, la comunicazione interpersonale è molto vicina al grado zero. . . . I mezzi di comunicazione di massa servono così tutt'al più a "perdere tempo" (a perdere il tempo?). E a scandire . . . lo stanco rito della ripetizione.

(Canova, *Schermi opachi* 197)

That is, contemporary means of mass communication operate what I like to define "la messa in oblio del tempo (e dello spazio)." Thus, in his critique of daily language, Soldini goes even further than Moretti, since the latter only questions the lexicon, while the former attacks its desolating syntax (Canova,

¹⁰ "Silvio Soldini: il caso e l'occasione" (Miccichè, *Schermi opachi* 192). To date, Canova's analysis seems to me the most attentive and engaging discussion of Soldini's cinema.

Schermi opachi 197). In the 1990s, Soldini's filmic tale leaves the closed and claustrophobic metropolitan space and travels new trajectories, trying but not managing to escape in an Italian landscape that is unfortunately uniformly homologated. In *Un'anima divisa in due* and *Le acrobate*, claustrophobia is the irreparable sign of an impossibility to find a way out and is restated by the plunge into spaces that are only apparently open, and by the painful inability to draw the map of the world according to the trajectories of the protagonists' loving and thus emotional gazes (Canova 198-200).

Bringing a significant contribution to the retrieval of the topos of the journey and to the mapping of the *koiné* of an entire generation, Gabriele Salvatores' tales of self-enunciation seem to be bridging the gaps between the various souls of the Italian cinema that moved its first steps in the early 1970s. Most of Salvatores' films, from his trilogy of 'road movies,' *Marrakech Express* (1989), *Turnè* (1990), and *Puerto Escondido* (1992), to *Mediterraneo* (1991), a journey in a utopian time zone, and its complementary pieces, *Sud* (1993) and the latest *Nirvana* (1996), find in a journey of sorts their theme and form. In more than one way, though, *Mediterraneo* offers the ideological justification of Salvatores' filmography as it developed since the late 1980s: the film is dedicated to those who are escaping, and escape is identified as the only way to remain alive and keep on dreaming. In Gabriele Salvatores' vision, to dream is the only possible reply to the irreparable loss of subjectivity that marks an age dominated by the hyperreality of mass-media culture. Survival is an ever-present theme in Salvatores' filmography, one which is especially emphasized in his latest films. Their diverse attempts to confront new and foreign cultures as well as to retrieve ancient and equally foreign ones, to draw alternative paths and survive, are often matched by failure and death in the time of repetition and homologation, such as in *Sud* and, especially, in *Nirvana*. Canova writes:

Nirvana estende insomma anche al mondo virtuale quel processo di omologazione topologica che pesa come una condanna su tutto il cinema di Salvatores. Nei due universi separati e paralleli della "realtà" e della "virtualità" si interfacciano due destini analoghi, si consumano due scelte omologhe tanto il personaggio "virtuale" . . . quanto il programmatista "reale" . . . scelgono di spezzare il ciclo delle infinite reincarnazioni e di rompere le regole del gioco chiamandosele fuori. L'estetica della sparizione e la tattica del rifiuto—già [or, I would say, *only*] sfiorate in alcuni film precedenti del regista—giungono qui alle loro estreme conseguenze. . . .

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E mentre il mondo si accinge a celebrare il Natale, la *fiction* di Salvatores si confronta—come mai in precedenza—con l'esperienza della morte, e con una laica e pessimistica "cognizione del dolore."

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In the history of this new way of conceiving filmmaking and its relationship to history and society, which sees a new stage beginning in the early 1990s, Silvio Soldini and Gabriele Salvatores, with the works they produced in the last decade of the second millennium, are, thus, examples of a tendency to reflect and/or represent the repetition, seriality and the unending present of the time and space of *simulacra*. This tendency often produces "oblivious narratives"; that is, narratives which record the "messa in oblio del tempo (e dello spazio)," and are reflections, or rather, by-products of an unending and serial memory. Conversely, Gianni Amelio and Nanni Moretti stand as prime examples of resistance and even opposition to the time of mass communication and *simulacra*. In any case, one must note that the best and most vital segment of contemporary Italian cinema seems to be finding a possibility for resistance and opposition to homologation and impoverishment, as I write elsewhere, "nell'apertura di un canale comunicativo tra l'esplorativo-documentario e l'introspeetivo-immaginario, tra la luce e il buio, tra il reale e l'irreale" (Gieri, in Fabbri and Guaraldi 309).¹¹ Perhaps the first self-conscious attempt to this cinematic practice is Federico Fellini's *La voce della luna* (*The Voice of the Moon* 1990). Gianni Amelio himself, in a long interview given to Emanuela Martini, makes a stance in favor of a "cinema sporco, quello imperfetto, che disfa," and indeed indicates Federico Fellini's *La voce della luna* as the best example of a conscious attempt to travel this new and original approach to filmmaking:

Se c'è un film che, visto tra trent'anni, ci dirà cos'era l'Italia negli anni '90, questo è *La voce della luna*. Non l'ha capito quasi nessuno. È un film agghiacciante. . . . Perché [Fellini] ha continuato a fare cinema fino all'ultimo momento? Perché in realtà ha continuato a disfarlo; negli ultimi tempi disfaceva quello che aveva fatto prima. . . . Mi sentirei diverso e starei molto meglio se fossi in una fase in cui "sporcare" il mio cinema fosse una cosa consapevole, cosciente, "felliniana."

(Martini 126)

Memory is thus a true obsession of contemporary cinematic narratives. Yet, as Vidali maintains, "the forms of time are linked to the forms of memory, and these are themselves connected to the essential structures of the kind of communication memory chooses to express itself with" (187). Thus, the kind of temporal forms each of these directors foreshadows in his narratives are closely linked to the essential structures of the communication in which memory expresses itself. Similarly the spatial forms are also renegotiated. Yet each of these diverse cinematic expressions participates in the shaping and development

¹¹ It is interesting to note how Calvino identified these two directions as the only venue for the cinema of close observation to retrieve a cognitive function (xx).

of an once again "new" Italian cinema. The date of birth of such cinema can be instrumentally set in 1993.

1993 is here considered as a watershed year in the history of contemporary Italian filmmaking. On October 30, Federico Fellini died and, as Gian Piero Brunetta perceptively suggested, "l'arresto del suo cuore dà l'impressione che vi sia nel mondo una sorta di ellissi e sospensione lunga del tempo reale" (1991, 378). In the same year Nanni Moretti made *Caro diario* (*Dear Diary*), a film which unquestionably closed a season of personal and collective reflection and opened an equally important and hopefully productive phase in the life and career of one of the most significant representatives of the generation that came of age in the 1970s. With this film, once again, Moretti restates his unabridged opposition to the homologation promoted by mass culture, to the impersonal, ever present and unending memory of television and mass communication, and their "oblivious" narratives. Yet such opposition now takes a venue which is quite different from the one pursued for nearly twenty years. While in the late 1970s Italian cinema was experiencing its most excruciating crisis with the demise of the *mise en scène* and the impoverishment of the *récit*, Moretti proposed his own body as a dense, neurotic and energetic sign of the complexity contemporary cinema was then denying.¹² As Mario Sesti pointedly observes, it is quite startling that at present nobody seems to be surprised by the fact that "proprio da questo cinema, partito da un'ostinata negazione dell'immagine, provengano oggi i segnali più densi del suo potere cinematografico" (*Nanni Moretti* 17). Sesti continues by reminding us that in Moretti's cinema the confrontation previously staged by the *mise en scène* between body and frame saw the former shape and limit the latter. Such confrontational stance mellowed down sensibly in a documentary and diaristic vocation which has made transparent the space, as well as the depth and sensibility of the gaze:

La sua scena originaria rimane sempre quella di una riconquista della comunicazione, sia nell'agonismo con i mass media, sia nell'occupazione dei suoi centri nevralgici (telefonate, lettere, impossibili interlocuzioni con il piccolo schermo), sia nel controllo ossessivo degli scambi di messaggi verbali (interpellazioni, conversazioni, moniti, imposizioni, lusinghe, persino interviste).

(Sesti, *Nanni Moretti* 18)

Yet, previously Moretti's cinema recorded the absolute dominion of verbal language and submitted the visual language of a frame to the whims of an exasperated subjectivity (Sesti, in *Nanni Moretti* 18). At the same time, such subjectivity

¹² See Sesti and his engaging and illuminating analysis in "La bella immagine. Aprile" (*Nanni Moretti* 13-19, especially 17).

metteva in gioco il linguaggio in quanto tale (la sua critica dei luoghi comuni del gergo) riduceva la finzione allo spettacolo della sua impossibilità (l'impossibilità del linguaggio della finzione come convenzione) e il racconto alla continua presenza del proprio corpo in scena come che attraversa il mondo come teatro di finzioni grottesche.

(Sesti, *Nanni Moretti* 18)

In closure, Sesti rightly observes that now the dominion of the body over the *récit*, from Mr. Bean to Benigni, and that of the optical elaboration of the image onto the recording function of Rossellinian memory (as one can see in *Titanic*) seem to be the conditions for the construction of the universal and transgenerational communication which has always been the qualifying trait of the cinema. He then wonders if Moretti's cinema will now move in the opposite direction, retrieve the filmic quality of the cinema and at the same time its "morality" (Sesti, *Nanni Moretti* 18-19). Indeed, Moretti's cinema as a whole can certainly be described as a highly moral and at times even moralistic personal and collective discourse.

Over the years and with each of his films, Nanni Moretti attempted to draw the diary of the cultural and ideological journey of an important segment of his generation. With his films he tried to leave the traces of the collective history of a generation otherwise "priva di memoria e di identità" (Brunetta 1991, 361-62). If it is true that a film is a fragment of reality and an attempt at its representation, it is also unquestionably true that with his cinema Nanni Moretti has constantly witnessed and interpreted the past of an entire generation, even though largely censuring it because of its most controversial moments: that is, terrorism.¹³ In this missing link may be found, for instance, the reason of the "memoria smemorata" that freezes the protagonist of *Palombella rossa* (*Red Lob*, 1989) in a no-place and no-time of sorts.

For years Moretti's films were hypercritical and self-reflexive as they exposed the proximity between the enunciating and the enunciated Subject. By blurring the boundaries between traditionally separated fields of discursive production and reception, they constantly provided a "cruel" self-portrait of their author and consequently of a segment of Italian society that was homologous to him from a social, generational, and political point of view (De Bernardinis 6). Early in his career, Moretti contributed to the creation of a new mode of filmmaking and to the definition of an equally new relationship between cinema and history as well as cinema and society. Thus, clearly, Moretti's cinematic tales proceeded to the renegotiation of their own temporal and spatial structures

¹³ Terrorism is a theme only superficially touched in his cinema and central in a movie he produced and in which he played the male lead, Mimmo Calopresti's *La seconda volta*. Unfortunately this film also remains victim of a certain *intimismo*, which is the cipher of a generalized inability to interpret and "mettere in forma" such a controversial and yet important moment of our near past.

as they were closely linked to and even affected by the same new form of memory from which they had generated.

Moretti's early films participated in the founding of a "new Italian mode of filmmaking" insofar as they aimed not only at breaking away from the authoritarian but no longer intimidating past of neorealism, but also defining their own specific cinematic discourse as self-ironic, self-critical and self-reflexive. Such discourse is internally ambivalent and fragmented; even editing serves no dramatic function but only works as a process of assembly of apparently discontinuous images and then sequences. In an interview with Jean Gili, Moretti states:

Donc dans mes premiers films, il y avait beaucoup d'allusions au cinéma comme absence, comme négation de ce que j'avais vu et que je ne voulais pas qu'il y ait dans mes films.

(15)

From the start, Moretti understood that a new "pensiero cinema"—that is, a coherent and cohesive as well as extensive idea about the cinema—was needed to allow Italian filmmaking to move into the twenty-first century. His first acclaimed Super 8 film, *Io sono un autarchico* (*I Am an Autarchic*, 1977) and then his first feature *Ecce Bombo* (1978), constitute Moretti's first and uncompromised denunciation of the overall loss of ideals and centrality in Italian society and cinema in the late 1970s. Yet, Moretti's entire cinematic journey builds a filmic specificity, a personal idea of the medium that can be defined as "cinema dell'assenza." This is a kind of cinema that at first "restringe il campo a un profilmico ridotto al corpo dell'attore parlante" (Bruno 5) and, moving even further, confines it to the body of the uttering or, rather, screaming actor/author/character: Nanni Moretti/Michele Apicella.¹⁴ The space drawn by Moretti's forcefully moral gaze displays complex and alienating planimetries. Dialogue ceases to be communicative and instead pursues an obsessive and neurotic affabulation of the subject/object. While Michele has progressively assumed multiple roles and thus became a reflection of an entire generation, Moretti's cinematic language has increasingly become "un fait de résistance: résister à la modernité, aux choses faciles" (Toubiana 23).

Nanni Moretti's neurotic and obsessive itinerary aimed at the construction of a personal and generational autobiography, culminating with *Palombella rossa*, a watershed work in his filmography. In this film, Michele Apicella, in a state of amnesia, has as sole certainty: being a communist. The proliferation of linguistic utterances that is a symptom of Michele's attempt to recover his past and the ability to interpret it, is paralleled by the progressive loss of the words'

¹⁴ Adding a surplus of meaning, one must note that the maiden name of Moretti's mother is Agata Apicella.

meaning. Thus, ultimately the film becomes an urgent and effective stance in favor of a cinema of silence, a cinema of movement and images or, rather, of "movement-images."¹⁵

It is in 1993 and with *Caro diario*, though, that Moretti closes his long discourse on autobiography and his personal investigation of the tormented planimetry of memory. With this film Moretti also opens a new season in his life and career, and in so doing he partakes in the process of birth of a new stage in the history of Italian cinema. Moretti's body, previously expropriated by Michele in the neurotic search for a generational identity, is now reappropriated by the director. That body is no longer a war machine, but here it becomes the point of departure for a global redefinition of the world of experience. Freed of Michele, Moretti can finally start a cataloguing of the objects that populate his world, thus rewriting his own personal and no longer collective *Erlebnis*. Lastly, then, irony and humor substitute the rage and fury that had characterized his cinema prior to *Caro diario*. Thus Nanni Moretti seems to have found a new and coherent "pensiero cinema," which not only subverts obsolete and authoritarian discursive strategies in cinema and society but also resists to the new and equally authoritarian discourses of homologation and impoverishment—personal and collective—promoted by a mass-media culture.

Despite his distaste for the so-called "cinema civile," in the good company of Gianni Amelio and a few other directors, and even when choosing different avenues, Nanni Moretti has constantly worked, and still works, as exemplified by the latest *Aprile*, for the creation of a cinema strongly committed to social, political and cultural critique and change, as well as the building of a new and honest personal and collective identity. I like to think about Moretti's work as a "cinema of resistance," with which he has always denounced and still denounces his conflictual relationship with contemporary Italy, a country characterized, as he himself once stated, by "les faux-semblantes, les mots vulgaires, la 'culture médiatique', la perte de goût, le renoncement idéologique et moral, la pseudo 'modernité'" (Toubiana 20). While unquestionably trying to find an alternative to and oppose the oblivious narratives of mass-media culture, with *Aprile* Moretti restates what has been a qualifying trait of his entire cinematic production. Indeed, here as well as in his entire filmography, Nanni Moretti's gaze onto the world is forcefully moral as it constantly traverses the ambiguous space between comedy and drama. Now, as always, his gaze pursues the juxtaposition of opposites but no longer constructs itself into a regime of discontinuity, rather seeking continuity.

The same moral stance characterizes Gianni Amelio's entire cinematic production, and yet, in the 1990s and especially in films such as *Il ladro di*

¹⁵ Here I borrow the term "movement-image" from Deleuze, *Cinema I*. For thorough discussions of *Palombella rossa*, see especially Toubiana; also: Bo; Bruno; Jousse; Micheletti; La Polla.

bambini (*Stolen Children*, 1992), *Lamerica* (1994) and *Così ridevano* (*They Were Laughing So*, 1998), Amelio's cinema, much alike Moretti's, offers a possibility of resistance and indeed of opposition to the serial tales produced by the never-ending memory of mass communication and its virtual realities. Both directors refocus their tales, as their gazes move from the mass to the individual, from the panorama to the detail in the attempt to retrieve truth, time, and thus history. Unquestionably, therefore, despite considerable differences, Nanni Moretti's and Gianni Amelio's reply to a contemporary interpretation of memory, and thus of time and space, has to do with the retrieval of a form of morality in face of the world of existence.

University of Toronto

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