

Analogue film, ghostly ontologies and the fairy-tale in *Bella e perduta* and *Lazzaro felice*

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Abstract

As the ecological crisis intensifies, the blurring of boundaries between the natural and the artificial is becoming increasingly obvious. Therefore, the question of the simulacrum, as it was posed by Baudrillard and the postmodern debate, is now being re-opened and signified. In the two Italian films *Bella e perduta* [Lost and Beautiful] (2015) and *Lazzaro felice* [Happy as Lazzaro] (2018), the impossibility of establishing a distinction between nature and culture, virtual and real, human and non-human finds expression in a cinematographic form. In these films, the clash is no longer located between reality and hyperreality but in a phantasmatic dialectic that rediscovers the value of the biological body by placing it in a network of historical, social and technological relations. Starting from the organic element, the two films unsettle the epistemological and cognitive frontiers of modernity by addressing the filmic support, the ontological status of the characters and the choice of narrative genre.

Keywords

Italian cinema; Pietro Marcello; Alice Rohrwacher; Donna Haraway; Ecocriticism; Posthumanism; Environmental Humanities

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For Jean Baudrillard, in the early 1980s, the advent of the information age marked the end of reality and the emergence of hyperreality. Instead of mimetic simulation models such as the map, the double, the mirror or the concept, the digital revolution led to the proliferation of simulacra: copies for which there is no original, devoid of any referentiality and able to replicate themselves endlessly like cancer cells, generating a real without origin or reality – more precisely: the hyperreal. In this regard, Baudrillard gave the example of the genetic code where: «the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these» (Baudrillard 1994: 2).

These considerations are symptomatic of the «border war» that was being fought during that time between the polarities of organic and inorganic, reality and fiction (Haraway 1991a: 150). In the 1980s, Donna Haraway took up Baudrillard's thinking and further destabilized these categories. Haraway showed that the opposition between the living and the machine reflects a stale opposition between nature and culture. At the same time, in contrast to the French thinker's resigned attitude, Haraway was looking for a way out of the «hell of the same» produced by the proliferation of codes in advanced capitalism (Gane 2006: 149).

In order to learn to live in such a «nightmare» (Gane 2006: 150), Haraway introduced the hybrid figure of the cyborg: «a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction» (Haraway 1991a: 149). By redrawing the frontiers of self and other, Haraway undermined the relationship between living and inanimate:

Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin? [...] These machine/organism relationships are obsolete, unnecessary. [...] Machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves. (*Ibid.*: 178)

Katherine Hayles, some ten years after *A Cyborg Manifesto*, also insisted on the ineffectiveness of a paradigm that continually moves from one pole to the other in view of a final salvation. In a 1999 article, Hayles wrote: «when the virtual is opposed to the natural, the emphasis falls on the redemptive potential of the natural world, which puts us back inside the paradoxes instead of giving us leverage to work through them» (Hayles 1999b: 677).

In an increasingly interconnected society, Hayles and Haraway were not just about weaving new ties with machines; their intention was not to devalue the importance of the natural world in order to rehabilitate the virtual one, often denigrated as the most radical expression of modernity's alienation from nature. On the contrary, they wanted to uncover the link between apparent numerical dematerialization and the ecological crisis, showing for example the substratum of increasing exploitation and vulnerability of the digital revolution's workers, in America and overseas (Haraway 1991a: 154).

For Hayles, and equally for Haraway, the virtual was not an escape route from environmental degradation – as is the case for those who suggest abandoning the overheated earth and colonizing Mars (Grinspoon 2004) – but an opportunity to rethink the very concept of nature, too often constrained in a nature/culture polarity that they both rejected.

Since 2000, the urgency to become aware of the environmental impact of our computerized societies has become more and more acute and has engendered a turn in the Western philosophical and aesthetic landscape (Descola 2005, Morton 2007, Latour 2015)¹. While in *A Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985 Haraway stated without hesitation: «The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics», in 2003 the philosopher made a decisive shift from the cyborg – which she still does not repudiate – towards companion species (2003). Haraway then focuses on another discriminating boundary, that which exists between humans and animals:

In the past, I wrote about cyborgs, a kind of companion-species congeries of organisms and information machines emergent from the Cold War. [...] Emergent over the time of “species being” (in the philosopher's idiom) for both participants, humans as companion

¹ In *Face à Gaïa* Bruno Latour refers to a «new climate regime», a new ecological paradigm capable of «turn[ing] away for good from the notions of “Modern” and “modernity”» (Latour, 2015: 11, 154). [all translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise]

species suggest distinct histories and lives compared with cyborgs. The term companion species refers to the old co-constitutive link between dogs and people, where dogs have been actors and not just recipients of action. [...] Further, companion species designates webbed bio-social-technical apparatuses of humans, animals, artifacts, and institutions in which particular ways of being emerge and are sustained. Or not. (Haraway 2008: 133-134)

Haraway joins forces with certain streams of post-humanism (Hayles 1999a), with animal studies (Hearne 2016), material feminism (Alaimo 2008) and material ecocriticism (Iovino - Oppermann 2014), in the attempt to rethink the human place in the modern world². This is not a matter of hoping for a post-biological future in which humans freed from their bodies can download their consciousness onto a computer, become immortal and surpass humanness (Kurzweil 2009). Rather, as Hayles puts it, it is to «reconceptualize the human in ways that take better account of embodiment, situated action, and interconnections with other entities» (2001: 146). Underlining our dependence to other species, Haraway points out that only ten per cent of the cells in our bodies contain a human genome. The remainder are made up of the genomes of bacteria, fungi etc. These considerations allow her to show the porosity of our bodily boundaries, proving that «we have never been human» but also that «to be one is always to become with many» (Haraway 2008: 3-4).

Given the ecological crisis and the rise of a hybrid phenomenon such as anthropogenic climate change, the blurring of boundaries between the natural and the artificial is becoming increasingly obvious (Descola 2005, Morton 2007, Latour 2015)³. Therefore, the question of the simulacrum, as it was posed by Baudrillard and the postmodern debate, is now being reopened and signified.

In the two Italian films *Bella e perduta* [Lost and Beautiful] (2015) by Pietro Marcello and *Lazzaro felice* [Happy as Lazzaro] (2018) by Alice Rohrwacher, the impossibility of establishing a distinction between nature and culture, between virtual and real, between human and non-human finds expression in a cinematographic form.

² The notions of “modern” and “modernity” are related to theoretical investigations by Bruno Latour, especially in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes* (1991).

³ This blurring of the boundaries between natural and artificial is also illustrated by a scientific phenomenon like the Anthropocene (Steffen 2011, Chakrabarty 2009).

In these films, however, the clash is no longer located between reality and hyperreality but in a phantasmatic dialectic that rediscovers the value of the biological body by placing it in a network of historical, social and technological relations. Starting from the organic element, the two films destabilize the epistemological and cognitive frontiers of modernity by addressing the filmic support, the ontological status of the characters and the choice of narrative genre.

After focusing on the oscillation between the organic component of analogue and digital film, the following analysis will then question the ontological status of the characters, liminal between the human and the bestial, ending with a discussion of how a hybrid type of narrative between documentary and fairy-tale results in a form of ecological engagement.

Analogue digital loop

Bella e perduta gives voice to Sarchiapone, a young buffalo living in the “Land of Fires”, the area between Naples and Caserta where people are exposed to wildfires because of the illegal disposal of toxic waste by the Camorra. *Lazzaro felice*, for his part, tells the story of Lazzaro: a simple-minded peasant who, after resurrecting from death, is projected from countryside to a fast-changing Italy.

To tell the adventures of Sarchiapone and Lazzaro, both films are shot on film, mainly substandard, and in the case of Pietro Marcello’s film also expired. In an interview, Marcello admits:

I shot on expired film which gave me the possibility of working with celluloid and therefore with an alchemical product that I could not control. I know it’s a paradox for me, belonging to a digital generation. (Cerofolini 2016)

Although they were born respectively in 1976 and 1982 and started out by shooting in digital, Pietro Marcello and Alice Rohrwacher have chosen to return to film, more specifically to the Super 16mm small format (Zonta, 2017: 74-92, 184-193). The choice of Super 16mm is generally dictated by a budget issue – it is more expensive to shoot in analogue, but less expensive if you choose the small format – but it is above all a way of reintroducing the organic element into the film process. While digital does allow for greater manipulation of the image, film, and in particular expired film, gives birth to an alchemical process of development that is not quite predictable. In order to capture the image, digital technology employs

electronic sensors that turn it into an electrical signal. The electrical signal is then digitalized and converted into a series of bits that are backed up on a digital storage medium. In the analogical case, light chemically modifies the body of the light-sensitive film: in contrast with digital, which records and shows everything, film conveys less information, has more grey areas and uncertainty in the image. On this subject, H el ene Louvart, the cinematographer of *Lazzaro felice*, notes:

Only the Super 16 fits Alice’s form and desire for cinema. We think that it is a medium that contributes something organic and artisanal and that corresponds to a different way of seeing the world. The Super 16’s rendering gives off a form of poetry, of “febrility” in the image, and we like the sensation of always being a bit surprised by the rendering of the images. (Barbier 2018)

The decision to shoot on film obviously has aesthetic implications, and indeed many critics have praised the nostalgic effect of the «sepia tinge» of *Lazzaro felice* (Mumford 2018) or the «delicate, watercolor-like greens and blues» of *Bella e perduta* (Scott 2016). But apart from the aesthetic component, the analogue technique has a profound effect on the film-making progress, in particular on the timing of the film. In fact, digital is usually preferred not only because of its lower costs and the possibility to alter the image, but also because it allows long and continuous filming. In this regard, Alice Rohrwacher states:

For me, who was born in the digital era, film is a veritable discovery. It is something that enchanted me, of course it is not very cheap, but I will use it as long as I can. Besides, it is a tool that helps me to have limits, to know what I can’t do, so it’s an important medium for me. (Di Paola 2018)

As it is a limited physical space, film constrains the director to think before each scene and to constantly rupture the shooting time. As Pietro Marcello considers: «Film time is different from digital time. You must shoot less, the film ends sooner, then you must stop, change. Film has different times. It is the time of cinema» (Casazza 2015).

In both films, analogue is also associated with a further aspect that one can hardly refrain from describing as political: shooting on film is not a nostalgic solution but an ethical stance. The materiality of film reflects the contradictions and fragility of contemporary Italy, in particular social pre-

cariousness and environmental degradation. Thus, Marcello infers: «there has always been for me a strong link between landscapes and the chosen medium, the film expires and so does the landscape» (*ibidem*).

A contiguity is thus created between the body of the film and real bodies, between technological flesh and social flesh. This contiguity can be found in the loop that both films make between analogue and digital. Indeed, in filmmaking practice, there is no fracture between digital and analogue – the above-mentioned border war – but rather a cycle: images recorded in analogue format are subsequently digitized for editing and distribution. Even archive films are digitalized at the time of restoration. Not to mention the enjoyment of films in cinemas and on our computer screens. This oscillation between analogue and digital also reverberates on the identity of the characters, resulting in a wavering between animality and bestiality that defies any ontology of the self.

Ghostly ontologies

In the second half of the 1990s, Gabriele Salvatores' cult cyberpunk film *Nirvana* depicted a dystopian Northern Italy, populated by hybrid creatures, cyborgs and strange figures huddled in the outskirts of a big city. Preceded by films such as *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) and *Strange Days* (1995), *Nirvana* tells the story of a programmer who tries to get back into his video game because, as a result of a virus, one of his characters has become aware of his identity: Solo – our character –, is thus trapped between reality and virtuality.

Twenty years later, the characters of *Bella e perduta* and *Lazzaro felice* are instead marked by a ghostly ontology situated at the frontier between humanity and animality. As *Bella e perduta* starts, the *dramatis personae* are listed as in a play. First comes Sarchiapone, the buffalo. Then Tommaso, the shepherd who adopts Sarchiapone and who volunteers to look after the abandoned palace of Carditello, left to the abuses of the mafia and turned it into a landfill. In Third comes Pulcinella, the Campanian character of Commedia dell'arte, who is also a psychopomp. Finally, the shepherd Gesuino, who is the last owner of the buffalo.

The initial purpose of the director was to create a documentary, a road movie through Italy of which the "Land of fires" was only one stage. But the sudden death of Tommaso, struck by a heart attack while filming, imposed a radical rethinking of the movie (Storto 2020: 88). In order to honor Tommaso, his story expands into the whole film, and the documentary turns into a fairy-tale. As a link is missing between the living buffalo and the dead

shepherd, Marcello brings in the phantasmatic figure of Pulcinella.

Pulcinella is a well-known mask from the Neapolitan folklore, derived from the commedia dell'arte featuring a white dress, a sugarloaf hat and a black half-mask exposing the mouth. Opportunistic and hungry, lazy and insolent, the mask of Pulcinella embodies a surrender to bestial instincts. According to some, the feminine ending of his name is a sign of the mask's hermaphroditism: the upper part – the nose, the hat, the hump – is male, while the lower part – the pregnant belly, the buttocks, the breasts – is female (Gambardella 2018).

However, the Pulcinella of the film is not the clown from the Italian tradition. Rather, he is a trickster, a liminal figure who is in contact with the afterlife. Neither divine nor earthly, neither alive nor dead, Pulcinella is sent among mortals in order to grant Sarchiapone the gift of speech and accompany him to a new master, the shepherd Gesuino, who is a shepherd in real life. It is immediately clear that Sarchiapone and Pulcinella share a common slavish fate. The buffalo serves men who, since they no longer need his services, kill him. Pulcinella serves the unpredictable will of the gods. Furthermore, they share a common nature. It is interesting to consider that the character of Pulcinella may derive from the hybrid figure of the satyr in ancient comedy⁴. Some make him grow out of a turkey egg, others out of a hen's egg (Agamben 2016: 47). His name is also animal-based: according to some, it comes from «chick», perhaps because of Pulcinella's hooked nose and clucking voice (Croce 1899: 12). As Giorgio Agamben notes:

Pulcinella's body is no longer, as in Western metaphysics, the animal presupposition of man. He breaks the false articulation between the merely living and the human, between the body and the logos. The anthropological machine of the West has jammed here. That is why his body – hilarious and, at the same time, deformed, neither properly human nor truly animal – is so difficult to define. (Agamben 2016: 123)

Even Sarchiapone, the talking buffalo, disrupts the Western anthropological machine. Endowed with voice at the request of Tommaso and through the intercession of Pulcinella, Sarchiapone narrates part of the film through voiceover. At the beginning of *Bella e perduta*, after ten minutes in which frames of interiors and landscapes flow before the camera to the

⁴ On the closeness between Pulcinella and ferality see Agamben 2016: 32-45.

sound of Donizetti, Sarchiapone utters the first words of the film:

As far as I am concerned, I would have liked to have been born on the moon or any other planet. Not that our planet isn't good enough as long as you're born with a big name or great luck. But that's not my case.

The anthropomorphism that enables Sarchiapone to speak is not the convention of animal fables but a challenge to our representative patterns⁵. It introduces us to a mode of knowing that is not an epistemology of objectification where «to know is to desubjectify», but rather where, as in the Amerindian shamanism studied by Viveiros de Castro, «to know is to personify, to take the point of view of what should be known or, rather, the one whom should be known» (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 60).

Sarchiapone is a real buffalo, a calf that dies because he is no longer in the production chain – he is not even needed for reproduction because the cows are artificially inseminated – and a creature of fantasy. Through his body of meat and his gentle voice, provided by actor Elio Germano, Sarchiapone denounces the unfairness of denying animals any subjectivity or agency. At the end of the film, led to the slaughterhouse, he reclaims the dignity of his animal nature:

Despite everything, I am proud to be a buffalo. In a world that denies we have a soul, being a buffalo is an art. Men have such a ridiculous belief, being the only ones to have a soul in this immense universe. But I'm sure that there, on other planets, where I'll go, they think differently about us.

Sarchiapone's bodily reality is further emphasized by the fact that Pietro Marcello alternates anthropomorphic sequences in which close-ups of the buffalo's face and eyes are accompanied by Elio Germano's voice-over and subjective scenes in which we literally see through the buffalo's standpoint, thus feeling as if we were being led to the slaughterhouse ourselves.

In *Lazzaro felice*, the liminal character between humanity and animal-

⁵ Taking up Latour, we could say that this is an «anti-anthropocentric anthropomorphism». In fact, Latour proposes employing personification to «use anthropomorphism against anthropocentrism», because «treating the other as if he or she were a person, inventing a “promising equivocation”, actually commits us to being interested in him or her, to thinking of “us” in terms of interaction» (Hache - Latour 2009: 157).

ity is embodied by Lazzaro. Lazzaro is a mild-tempered young peasant, always wonder-struck, smiling and willing to serve. In his role as protagonist, Lazzaro acts as a link between the two parts of the film. The first is set in The Inviolata natural park, in central Italy, where fifty peasants live in a fictional country estate cultivating tobacco. Cut off from the world in the aftermath of a flood, the peasants ignore that sharecropping has been abolished and work as serfs for a Marquise.

The second part takes place some years later, on the outskirts of a big city which is also fictional. After discovering the Marquise's deception, the peasants have moved to the city and transformed themselves from serfs to suburban underclass (Garcia 2018: 42). Lazzaro's death and resurrection mark the break between the first and the second part of the film.

Until then, despite the fabulous character of Lazzaro and the anachronistic slavery of sharecroppers, we follow the story in a linear and almost documentary fashion, but when Lazzaro falls into an escarpment and dies, the voice-over of Antonia, a young peasant, suspends time to tell the story of Saint Francis and the wolf:

Let me tell you a story, the story of a wolf. A very old wolf had become decrepit. He could no longer hunt wild animals. So he was excluded from the pack and the old wolf came to the houses to steal cattle, chickens, sheep. [...] Word spread that a saint could talk to animals, who understood him and obeyed him. [...] The saint set out to find [the wolf]. At one point the saint falls to the ground exhausted in the snow, that is where the wolf finds him.

The wolf, the narrator tells us, could eat the saint but spares him because he smells like a good man. At that very moment, a wolf appears on the scene. He licks the corpse of Lazzaro until the latter gets up and walks. The association with the wolf makes clear Lazarus' closeness to the animal world. Being a simple man, his naivety is in fact traditionally associated with animality and idiocy.

At the same time, the film plays with explicit religious references: the name of Lazzaro, the encounter with the wolf, the ecstatic idiocy of the 'pure madman', the meekness of the scapegoat, the hagiography of the saint, non-violence and resurrection (Fanara 2020: 243-4, Garcia 2018: 41-42). On this matter, Rohrwacher notes:

My film is somewhat religious, but in a pre-religious sense, in the prehistoric sense of the word. Being a sort of story of a saint, close to

Saint Francis, *Lazzaro felice* is a spiritual film, but it is made of concrete realities, of sweat, of bodies, of places, of smells, of labours of an archaic but not so distant world. (Di Paola 2018)

Hovering between sanctity and animality, Lazzaro is ultimately an elusive character. He suffers the abuses of power and does not respond to insults, but neither does he judge nor take a stand against the arrogance of the Marquise and finally sides with her son. Thus, deciphering Lazzaro beyond this threshold of innocence and idiocy proves impossible (Garcia 2018: 43). Through the character of Lazzaro, Rohrwacher intends indeed to celebrate:

something that keeps reappearing and is always the same. It is incredible and intact. It is something we experience when we are very young [...]. It is when we have no expectations or don't know what is ugly or beautiful. We just look. (*Ibid.*: 42)

In the second part of the film, the resurrection makes Lazzaro a *revenant*. Neither dead nor alive, neither present nor absent, he escapes any philosophy of the subject. His personality is ecstatic in the literal sense. Often, he stops to look at the moon, the television or the void, coming out of himself. This effect is also rendered on a filmic level by chaining together close-ups of the actor's face and wider shots, most often high up, of the landscape in which Lazzaro is embedded, especially moonscapes. This lack of identity unites him to Sarchiapone and Pulcinella. Their absence of self, be it the inability to speak or to reason, questions our own conceptions of humanity.

Humanity, both films tell us, is not fixed once and for all, but a category to be renegotiated continuously. Until the advent of modernity, animals were regarded as having speech and intellectual faculties. Carolyn Merchant's famous essay, *The Death of Nature*, shows how the vision of an organic, animated cosmos gradually crumbled from the 16th and 17th centuries with the mechanistic revolution (Merchant 2003). The mechanical and rationalist order that followed saw the Earth and its non-human inhabitants as a machine, an inert and passive mass that science and technology could measure and exploit at will (Latour 2015: 67-8). This was also the case with Cartesian animals, classified as *res extensa* and considered to be completely void of sentience (Brentari 2016: 142).

On the other hand, as Donna Haraway and Vinciane Despret point out, animals have often been used as figurants in representations of humans. The great apes, for example, provided the «pre-rational, pre-cultural essence»

that allowed humans to explain the origins of their species and their history (Haraway 1991b: 11). Haraway shows, in fact, how animal societies have often served as a pretext, in Western history, for founding human oppression of humans, racism, the naturalization of patriarchy and the physiological distinction between sexual genders. According to Bertrand Russell:

It seemed that animals always behave in a manner showing the rightness of the philosophy entertained by the man who observes them. [...] Throughout the reign of Queen Victoria all apes were virtuous monogamists, but during the dissolute twenties their morals underwent a disastrous deterioration. (Russell 2010: 200)

Pulcinella, Sarchiapone and Lazzaro are not symbols detached from the bodily aspect but figures in the sense that Haraway attributes to this word: entities that are at once chimerical and biological, real and imaginary, on and off the screen. In both films, the critique of anthropocentrism and dominant models of subjectivation results in a ghostly ontology that abolishes the precedence of any original, and where the simulacrum «harbors a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction» beyond any privileged point of view or hierarchy (Haraway 1990: 258).

Between fairy-tale and documentary

Bringing to the foreground «the unthinkable» of our societies, the environmental crisis is undermining our cultural narratives as well as our representative and cognitive structures (Ghosh 2017). In order to deal with the complexity of the Anthropocene and Climate Change, we must indeed imagine other stories and listen to other voices (Tsing 2017).

From the 2000s onwards, many writers and filmmakers have departed from realism to embrace estranging devices which we normally associate with fantasy, science-fiction or the fairy-tale⁶. But these phenomena are not to be ascribed to a regressive desire, nor to the appreciation of a lost gold-

⁶ Amitav Ghosh, Carla Benedetti and Alexandre Gefen are among the first to show how the ecological crisis calls for a destabilization of the «realist regime» for the benefit of an expansion of the literary field which on the one hand reclaims archaic genres such as the fairy tale and on the other resorts to genres that are considered «unserious» or consumerist such as science fiction (Ghosh 2017; Benedetti 2021; Gefen 2021).

en age expressed in the pure forms of myth and fairy-tales. For Marcello as for Rohrwacher, the fantastic disguise is not a nostalgic choice. As Val Plumwood observes:

Instrumental culture has prepared an exceptional place for speaking matter, as the exceptional context of the fairy-tale, or the irrational space of the eerie and haunted. (Plumwood 2007: 18)

In the films, the cognitive estrangement conveyed by the fairy-tale – the resurrection of Lazzaro following his encounter with the wolf, the talking buffalo – prompts us to challenge our «instrumental» experiential framework. Like the loop between analog and digital and the liminal figures of the characters, the fairy-tale destabilizes our perception of reality to the point of making us wonder whether these films are not, after all, realistic in another way⁷. Thus, for Rohrwacher, «*Lazzaro Felice* is a film where there is only reality. But sometimes reality is unbelievable» (Garcia 2018: 42).

As we broaden our perception of reality, the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction proves pointless. And the same applies to the fairy-tale label: «Dreams and fairy-tales, even if imaginary, should tell the truth», says Sarchiapone at the end of the film. As Luigi Storto considers:

Bella e perduta is a fictional tale that on several occasions finds itself forced to open glimpses of factual reality, or more prosaically, of what we call “real life”, which as such is made up of afterthoughts, abrupt interruptions, but also of loss and mourning. The best term to explain this approach is perhaps “porosity”: *Bella e perduta* is a fairy-tale that allows itself to be permeated by the real, in a perfect example of mediation between reality and its restitution. (Storto 2020: 89)

In both films, the fairy-tale is then mixed with the documentary in portraying a ferocious system of exploitation⁸. Whether they are discussing intensive farming or feudal oppression about peasants, the underclass or slaughterhouses, the films insist on representing the exploitation of man

⁷ Daniele Dottorini emphasised how, alongside a «cinema of the real», in recent years a «cinema for the real» has emerged, characterized by a tensing up of reality, a cinema that has to renegotiate its modes of expression precisely in order to tell reality (Dottorini 2017).

⁸ Not surprisingly, both directors refer to Ermanno Olmi, who masterfully depicted rural life and never abandoned the documentary style during his film career.

as inseparable from the exploitation of nature and animals.

The Benjaminian desire to tell the stories of the vanquished, of those that History with a capital H leaves aside, is reflected in the choice of non-professional actors and in a documentary focus which leads Rohrwacher to consult the archive and Marcello to include archive footage⁹.

For instance, the inspiration for *Lazzaro felice* comes from a short article the history teacher handed out to Rohrwacher's class: it was «the story of a dreadful marquise, denounced because, taking advantage of the isolation of some of her properties, she had not told the peasants that sharecropping was ended by law» (Di Paola 2018).

Thus, in the film, the marquise explains that she exploits the sharecroppers because: «Human beings are like beasts. Freeing them means making them aware of their own condition of slavery. I exploit them and they exploit Lazzaro. It is a chain, and it cannot be stopped». This consideration becomes inescapable in the second part of *Lazzaro felice* when, despite the liberation from sharecropping, the former peasants discover that exploitation has not ceased but has simply taken on new forms.

Similarly, by displaying documentary clips of demonstrations against the Camorra, but also of clashes between the Italian state and the citizens of Campania over poor waste management and the siting of landfills, *Bella e perduta* shows the contradictions of a landscape that, although it literally hides the poisons of toxic waste, inspires pastoral idyll.

It is no coincidence that Virgil's bucolic poems were born here, and that the "Land of fires" is also the famous *Campania Felix*, the beautiful and fertile land that regularly produced three harvests a year (Zonta 2017: 86). Through the spread of poisons and cancers, the landscape and people are both brutalized by the violence of the Camorra.

As Joan Martinez Alier has taught, it is not because a struggle does not claim to be directly ecological that it is not ecological (Alier 2005). On the contrary, like the inhabitants of the Amazon and so many other threatened regions of the world, one can be part of an ecological struggle without defining it as such.

This analysis applies as much to the shepherds and citizens of waste-besieged Campania as it does to the peasants and underclass of *Lazzaro felice*. Both films therefore convey the idea that the violence we do to others – nature, landscape, animals – is a self-destructive violence that we

⁹ To collect documents on the agrarian landscape and peasant life, Rohrwacher visited the Sereni archive in Reggio Emilia (Zonta 2017: 188).

also inflict on ourselves. It is a loop in which the violence inflicted comes back to hit man in a retroactive cycle.

Rather than offering the wonders of a lost world, the blend of fairy-tale and documentary is then a way of unsettling fatalistic narratives which, in the name of realism, condemn us to embrace ecological disaster (Ghosh 2017). The tale, instead of simply denouncing injustice, performs the operation which, according to Haraway and Stengers, is the key of 'speculative fabulation': that of making relevant things that had until then been considered negligible, paving the way for the possible to come (Stengers 2006: 122)¹⁰. As Dottorini notes for *Bella e perduta* – but the same seems to apply to *Lazzaro felice*:

The narrative form literally invades the documentary gaze, not to deny it nor to give it a structure that comes from "outside". But precisely to enter the play of image research. [...] It is a cinematic tradition, we said. Yes, because it is not difficult to see, looking backwards, something that has long marked the history of our cinema. The ability to make storytelling both the engine and the image of a cinema that creates a short circuit between past and present. That is, which uses filmed images in the here and now [...] to reveal their temporal charge and, above all, the power of storytelling. (Dottorini 2019: 287)

By choosing to combine the two seemingly irreconcilable genres of fairy-tale and documentary, the films set in motion a dialectic that is not exclusive but «spectral», as Derrida puts it (De Baecque 2001; Blanco - Peeren 2013). Both *Bella e perduta* and *Lazzaro felice* are in fact pervaded by antithetical polarities, starting with the tension between extinction and survival, city and country, myth and progress, past and present, bestiality and humanity.

This ghostliness particularly affects the narrative structure of the films. The ghostly dimension of *Bella e perduta*, made manifest through the title after Verdi's *Nabucco*, where 'lost' refers to the homeland, is most evident in the figure of the shepherd Tommaso, former master of Sarchiapone. In fact, although at the beginning of the film the news informs us of Tommaso's death, his ghost is always wandering around in the palace of Carditello, preventing us from placing ourselves precisely in the story, confusing the distinctions between reality, hallucination and flashback.

¹⁰ On survival stories and speculative fabulation see Despret and Stengers 2011; Haraway 2016; Tsing 2017, 2021.

The overlaps in presence and absence destabilize temporality in a parallel universe where all times coexist. This transtime in which past, present and future are compounded, manifests itself in the layers that make up the landscape. This can be seen in the sequence in which Gesuino digs and descends underground to rob an ancient tomb.

The deconstruction of temporal linearity also characterizes *Lazzaro felice*: the resurrection of Lazzaro and his second life, in fact, result in an overlapping of several sedimented temporal layers. As Rohrwacher notes in an interview:

The desire not to fix space-time boundaries also lies in my choice of narrative that goes on, as in my other films, through jumps in time. I would say that precise dates, rigid time coordinates do not interest me and I do not think they add anything to the story. I always try to make the spectator forget the passing of time, to transport him into a unique time, in which the present is past and the past is present [...]. In *Lazzaro felice* we almost invented an era. (Di Paola 2018)

Thus, from one side of the film to the other, the sharecroppers of an ahistorical past and the underclass of an unidentified city – *Lazzaro felice* was shot in Milan, Turin and Civitavecchia – reach out to each other. Whether it is the tobacco plantation or the bank where Lazzaro dies a second time at the end of the film, the rural and urban landscapes form the backdrop to the same scene of exploitation, in a loop. The fairy-tale pierces the loop to open a breach to another story, another relationship with nature, no longer simply one of domination and exploitation, but one of respect.

In both films, the destabilization between time barriers thus becomes a chance to recover the past but above all to unfold the possibilities of the future. If there is a ghostly dimension in the films, it is therefore not that of the simulacrum in Baudrillard's sense, nor that of a post-organic post-human released from the body. Rather, it is an ontological tension, a rethinking of the human starting from the dramatization of the biological element. Between analogue and digital, between human and animal, between documentary and fairy tale, a dialectic emerges that undermines our cognitive structures and implements the rethinking we need to «create hope even at the bottom of the abyss» (Stengers 2009).

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