

SLAPSTICK AND MONSTROSITIES: A RHETORIC OF EXCESS IN THE COMIC FILMS OF ROBERTO BENIGNI

DIANE BRACCO

A natural heir to *Commedia dell'Arte* and an artistic descendant of the Neapolitan comedian Totò (Governi: 2017), actor and filmmaker Roberto Benigni has emerged as a veritable figure of excess on the Italian cultural scene of our times, both for the eccentric characters he portrays in his films and for his behaviour off-screen. For this comedian initiated very early into the performing arts by the improvisational poetry of his native Tuscany,¹ any public appearance becomes a pretext for theatrical antics, a chance to unleash his explosive physical vitality and his irreverent and eloquent verbosity. On screen, the different characters he portrays in his own pictures and those of other directors² are all facets of the film character that Benigni first began developing in the late 1970s, whose excesses are tailor-made to fit the spectacular personality of the performer, projected onto the diegesis and evolving from one film to the next. While the filmmaker's work took on a new tragic dimension with *Life Is Beautiful* (*La vita*

è bella, Roberto Benigni, 1997), all of his feature films reveal an obvious predilection for the comedic genre and the resources of the burlesque. But far from seeking only to glorify the jester and to offer mere public entertainment, the style of comic farce developed by this actor-filmmaker serves as the vector for a satirical discourse that paints a caustic picture of the contradictions and dysfunctions of Italian society at the end of the twentieth century.

From this critical perspective, Benigni gives life to a burlesque, excessive, marginalised character that embodies a rhetoric of excess based in part on the carnivalesque mechanisms of exaggeration and inversion. Represented as a destabilisation of boundaries, excess in Benigni's films can be understood as both a rhetoric of hyperbole and a phenomenon of transgression. It involves, on the one hand, the outbursts of a burlesque body repressed by the social body, and on the other, the jester's disruption of the normative bound-

aries established by society. This article offers an analysis of this rhetoric of excess, focusing on the comedy *The Monster* (Il mostro, Roberto Benigni, 1994), which is particularly significant in this respect: based on the narrative mechanism of *quid pro quo*, this film is underpinned by a thematic core of excessiveness, considered through the prism of a multifaceted monstrosity.

Loris, played by Benigni, is unemployed and survives off schemes and scams. As a result of a clumsy, unsuccessful attempt at seduction, he is mistaken—without his knowing it—for a serial rapist and killer that the police have been pursuing for twelve years. On the advice of the psychiatric expert Professor Taccone, the police chief assigns Officer Jessica Rossetti the task of charming her way into Loris's life in order to trigger his supposedly psychopathic impulses, with the aim of catching him in *flagrante delicto* and arresting him. Jessica very quickly becomes the suspect's flatmate and diligently carries out her boss's instructions. However, contrary to all expectations, the harmless Loris reacts dispassionately to her advances. Day after day, despite the blind obstinacy of her superiors, Jessica begins to realise that Loris is not the monster they thought he was and will take steps to clear up the mistake.

The film's title points from the outset to the omnipresence of the theme of monstrosity, the representations of which is examined here in light of their association with the notion of excess, contrasted with what is presented in the diegesis as its opposite: supposed "normality". Benigni's exuberant jester is positioned on the fringes of a society against which he struggles desperately, using the resistance of the burlesque body to oppose the repression of the authorities that want to confine him in the territory of the monstrous. His peripheral position makes him an eminently excessive figure, as we see him constantly transgressing the pact on which life in society is founded. This constitutes the very heart of Benigni's biting satire in a film that combines burlesque mechanisms and

carnavalesque strategies to expose the absurdity of the established order and the monstrous power of manipulation of its agents.

LORIS, A MONSTER OF NORMALITY?

The Monster is the final chapter of a burlesque trilogy that began in 1988 with *The Little Devil* (Il piccolo diavolo, Roberto Benigni), a feature film that represented a milestone in the filmmaker's career as it marked the beginning of his collaboration with the screenwriter Vincenzo Cerami. This writing partnership, which continued in 1991 with *Johnny Stecchino*, allowed Benigni to develop a more sophisticated comic architecture, thanks to the painstaking work on the inscription of the gag into the general economy of the story. This greater narrative rigour entailed a deeper exploration of motifs and issues previously touched on by the filmmaker, highlighting the consistency of a creative universe in evolution. Loris, the protagonist in *The Monster*, in fact appears as the new incarnation of the naive character that Benigni constructed in his previous two films. In all three films of the trilogy, the actor-filmmaker plays an individual who is a victim of the laws of a world he doesn't understand, and whose mechanisms he lays bare. His characters manifest a childlike ingenuousness that disrupts all social norms: the source of countless misunderstandings, his exaggerated clumsiness brings to light the incompatibility of Christian dogma with natural human desires in *The Little Devil* (Celli, 2001: 77-82), and upturns the mafia-corrupt society of Palermo, whose rotten core is involuntarily exposed by the clueless protagonist in *Johnny Stecchino* (Celli, 2001: 83-86). Loris, who is completely unaware of the intrigue in which he is embroiled until the end of the film, has inherited the innocence of *The Little Devil's* mischievous Giuditta and *Johnny Stecchino's* timid Dante; at the same time, he continues Benigni's genealogy of ordinary guys established by the anti-heroes of his previous films. Like Dan-



Image 1. Pascucci and Loris: two antithetical masculinities

te, Loris is portrayed as an average, even mediocre individual, a professional failure who lives alone in a flat on the outskirts of Rome. His ordinary appearance as a short, slight, balding man and his uniformly grey, oversized suits obviously constitute an obstacle to his fruitless quest for a sexual partner. In other words, Loris conveys the image of an insignificant masculinity, the opposite of the model of social and romantic success embodied by his friend and sometime boss, Pascucci (Image 1).

However, in the opening moments of the film, Police Chief Frustalupi explains to journalists (and thus to the viewer) that the man given the nickname “the Monster”,³ a serial killer responsible for close to twenty murders, all systematically preceded by rape and followed by the dismemberment of his victims’ bodies, probably looks quite ordinary: “But you mustn’t imagine that this man is some hideous and disgusting beast. He is no doubt a regular, run-of-the-mill guy. The trouble is, behind that mask of ordinariness, there is a rapist, a depraved person, a sex-crazed man behind that good guy’s mask. There is a monster”.⁴

This normal/monstrous dialectic forms the very foundation of the intrigue generated by the initial *quid pro quo*. After attacking an elderly woman whom he mistook for a nymphoma-

niac, terrifying her when he accidentally sets off an electric saw at a gardening show organised by Pascucci, Loris, without knowing it, is erroneously identified by police as “the Monster”. The rich semantic field of normality and monstrousness that peppers the dialogues invites the spectator, as the story unfolds, to consider the definitions attributed to these opposing terms by the different characters in the film. The abnormal nature of the criminal described

by the police chief and the psychiatric expert recalls the “archaeology of abnormality” described by Michel Foucault (1999: 51-74) in his classes at *Collège de France*. Based on an analysis of the profiles of criminals and individuals considered dangerous in the nineteenth century, Foucault proposed the classification of human monstrosity in a field that he defines as “legal-biological”. In the case that concerns us here, monstrosity is not an organic anomaly—the police chief stresses the probable absence of any physical sign of mental deviation—but a form of “moral monstrosity”, of the extreme criminality which, according to Foucault (1999: 69-70), is similar to a teratological aberration. Indeed, in the sequence that follows the opening credits, Frustalupi declares his determination to eradicate the “monstrous criminality” (to use Foucault’s expression) that drives the killer who rapes and murders women because he is unable to control the primal instincts that take him over. The police chief thus depicts the predator as an abomination of the social body who personifies excess as a transgression of boundaries on two levels: the atrocities perpetrated by “the Monster” are a violation of his nature as a man, and represent, in legal terms, a breach of the social contract.

The link suggested between the police chief's words and the subsequent appearance of Loris on the screen lead us at first to suspect that the protagonist is in fact the lecherous monster the police are after. The images immediately following the sequence of the police interview seem to confirm Frustalupi's description, showing a man driven by his sexual urges. But within a few minutes it becomes clear that this character is, in reality, a victim of a misunderstanding and of his own excessive clumsiness. Indeed, by virtue of its very structure, the filmic narrative soon reveals that this first, moral definition of monstrosity doesn't match up with the real nature of the character. The original *quid pro quo* thus introduces two parallel narrative levels (on one level, Loris's actions; on the other, the misinterpretation of those actions by the authorities) whose presence gives spectators an omniscience that makes them aware the mistake behind the actions of the police: we accompany Loris in his ordinary everyday life alongside Jessica, who, through her forced cohabitation with the protagonist, moves from the narrative level of the misreading of the facts to the level of reality. In response to the obstinacy of her superiors, she keeps repeating that her flatmate, in view of his resistance to all temptation of the flesh, is "normal", "behaves normally", in complete contrast with the characterisation of sexual monster insisted on by the police chief and the psychiatrist.

Nevertheless, although this ordinary man exhibits none of the pathological qualities identified by the authorities, his everyday life, punctuated by theft and subterfuge to avoid having to pay his rent and his bills, hardly presents an image of a "normal" person according to the social rules related to the contribution we are ex-

pected to make to the successful functioning of our community. Loris's existence is positioned on the fringes of society, and the character is thus depicted as a borderline individual, evoking what for Alain Corbin (2005: 374) is the original definition of the monster: a "failure of Creation" who lives on the boundaries of the known world, a literally eccentric creature. Indeed, in geographical terms, Loris resides on the edges of a periphery under construction, a monstrous outgrowth of Rome's urban sprawl, whose unfinished and inhospitable nature is highlighted visually with various wide shots and aerial shots (Image 2). Loris lives in a flat in the last building of this suburban neighbourhood, a boundary of concrete, cranes and scaffolding beyond which is nothing more than a vast wasteland. This marginalisation is underscored by the hostile relationships that the character maintains with his fellow citizens, who hound him or seek to expel him even from the fringes of the social body: the building manager, who is desperately trying to kick him out of his home; his neighbour's children, who harass him by dropping dead cats at his door; an antique dealer from whom he stole a watch, who recognises him in the street and chases him on two occasions to try to force him to pay what he owes.

Image 2. Loris's suburban neighbourhood: the city outskirts



This exclusion intensifies when, as a result of the charges brought against him by the elderly lady at the start of the film, Loris becomes a target for the police, who broadcast his facial composite on television. Later on, shortly after another murder has been committed, members of the public take justice into their own hands and chase Loris through the streets of Rome, much to his surprise. This sequence incidentally conjures up definitions based on two different etymologies of the word “monster”: *monstrare* (“to show”) and *monere* (“to warn”). On this point, the historian Georges Vigarello (2005: 380) notes that the monster originally designated something exposed, which exhibits its difference before the eyes of so-called “normal” individuals. At the same time, the monstrous individual is an omen, a divine warning that reveals the destiny of the community; in ancient societies, he was condemned to death in a cathartic ritual as a means of dispelling collective fears. In effect, the ordinary man portrayed by Benigni, accused of being the sexual monster described by the police, is recognised, pointed at, literally *shown* by the passers-by and journalists gathered in front of his building, before being cornered by the enraged crowd, acting as a synecdoche for a society that seeks to purge itself by eliminating this marginalised individual.

“BEHAVIOUR HARDLY IN KEEPING WITH CIVILISED DEMOCRATIC COEXISTENCE”:⁵ THE REBELLION OF THE BURLESQUE BODY

“The majority can go screw themselves!”⁶ This individualist retort aimed irately by the unemployed Loris at his middle-class neighbours is illustrative of the behaviour of a social monster who maintains his own marginalisation and strives to break the contract on which community life is founded. In particular, he makes a point of ignoring the principle of the majority that regulates the democratic functioning of his residential complex, a small-scale image of a so-

ciety in which he deliberately positions himself as an outlaw. It is important to highlight the fact that in the entire film, Loris only once manages to escape the fringes to which he is confined: with no steady job (although he works occasionally for Pascucci in his gardening business), he hopes to be hired by a big Chinese corporation, to which end he is taking private language classes that ultimately prove to be a complete waste of time, because on the day of his job interview he doesn’t understand a single word spoken to him in Mandarin. He is tossed out after just five minutes by the interview panel, another synecdoche for a hostile, exclusive society. With the exception of this fruitless attempt to integrate, Loris dedicates his life to transgressing the rules of a society governed entirely by economic logic: his many clever ploys include avoiding the doorman at his building, who is thus never able to deliver his bills to him; frightening off the potential buyers to whom the property manager is desperately trying to sell his apartment; stealing the garden gnomes that adorn the green areas of the condominium; shopping at the supermarket without having to pay for his groceries; stealing a newspaper from a news stand; or eating a breakfast paid for by other customers at a café.

On the level of the *mise-en-scène*, Loris’s strategies to survive on the fringes of what he sees as a tyranny of the majority entail the production of a meticulously choreographed burlesque performance, the expression of a body that relentlessly struggles with the social and economic barriers imposed by society. The character’s exuberance, which obviously evokes the gesticulations of a puppet, could be considered an anti-conformist stance, an idea developed by the theorist Petr Král (1984: 99) in his studies of the burlesque, and a reaction to the aggressions of his environment. In an effort to defend the members of a community that stigmatises him, the jester crouches, contorts himself, jumps, stumbles, rises, runs out, etc. (Image 3). All these actions combine physical comedy and situation com-

edy, revealing the richness of bodily expression in the director's creative universe. "The element of the body is for the burlesque an essential component that exploits its excesses and deformations," argues Emmanuel Dreux (2007: 31), author of a book that defines the burlesque in cinema as an aesthetic of subversive gestures that destabilises to the point of inverting the established order. The constant physical outbursts that characterise the marginalised character in Benigni's work, in *The Monster* and in his other feature films, invite us to view the burlesque as the cornerstone of the rhetoric of excess adopted by the filmmaker, which evokes the legacy of both the Italian popular theatre tradition (Mileschi and Sacchelli, 2006: 59) and the great comedians of Hollywood's burlesque cinema (Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Groucho Marx).

In positioning himself against social norms, Loris, like all the other characters portrayed by Benigni, literally gives hyperbole and transgression a body, as authors like Christophe Mileschi and

Oreste Sacchelli (2006: 127) have shown. Insubstantial but elastic, "[c]onstantly on the verge of dislocation, of dissonant movement", his figure explodes into a multitude of arabesques and acrobatics that dramatise the many schemes of the protagonist. When he breaks into speech, it is often in the form of a verbal torrent that accompanies his mimicry and gesticulations in an emphatic series of gestures enacted in a necessarily larger space than a close-up would allow (medium shots, medium-long shots and full shots are the preferred options for filming the protagonist's actions). On several occasions, the redundancy that connects word and gesture serves as a shield against the representatives of the social body: Loris's logorhoea and dizzying dance steps, for example, provoke the early departure of the first potential buyer who visits his apartment, followed immediately thereafter by the departure of the furious property manager. It is worth adding that it is an essentially two-dimensional context that frames this

Image 3. The contortions of the jester



staging of excess, whose main driving force is the body: the exclusion of sophisticated camera movements and the limited use of depth of field contribute to the elaboration of a linear cinematographic language in which the body, anarchic, literally transported, maintains a frontal relationship with the camera to offer its spectacular contortions in moments of emotional hysteria.

However, although Benigni's nimble clown, clearly modelled on Buster Keaton, sets up "the elusive line of [his] mobility" in opposition to the aggressive forms of his environment, as highlighted by the film theorist and critic Vincent Amiel (1998: 98), he is still often a victim of circumstance. The objects that Loris unintentionally manipulates and diverts from their traditional uses seem to conspire against his naivety, thereby provoking an avalanche of gags that update the burlesque strategies of the silent film era: the electric saw in the sequence following the opening credits or, later on, the meat cleaver and the torch with which he accidentally terrifies the psychiatrist's wife turn against his will into weapons that place him in ambiguous situations of *flagrante delicto* and further confirm the authorities' convictions in their misreading of his intentions (Image 4).

Loris does not escape entirely from the conformity of his environment either, despite his determination to resist the pressure of the social

body. Indeed, taking the thoroughly macho advice offered by his friend Pascucci, he makes an effort to resist Jessica's charms (Pascucci had previously explained to him that a real man seduces, but should never let himself be seduced). In a long, six-minute sequence that combines the logic of accumulation with hyperbolic bodily expression, Jessica, carrying out the instructions of her superiors, engages in a richly burlesque choreography of her own (Image 5). She moves tirelessly through the flat wearing different provocative outfits, adopting improbable postures to expose herself to Loris, who winces, literally twisting and banging his head against the walls in an effort to contain the desire that threatens to undo him. This comic ballet unfolds to the rhythm of the nonsense that spills from the mouths of both characters: Jessica accompanies her acrobatics with a profusion of monologues with no rhyme or reason, while Loris struggles to divert his attention from her feminine wiles by mechanically reciting a series of financial and speculative considerations, as Pascucci advised him to do. It is worth noting here that the comic effect produced by the incongruence of Loris' words in this context of erotic provocation once again depicts economics as a symbol of the absurd contemporary society that has fenced in the jester, whose expressions of excess contribute to a portrayal of that society that is nothing short of vitriolic.

Image 4. *Flagrante delicto*: the gag with the meat chopper and the torch. Image 5. Jessica's burlesque choreography



EXCESS AS A SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY: SATIRISING A MONSTROUS SOCIETY

The burlesque excess that Benigni expresses in *The Monster*, and more generally in all his work, finds its roots in the carnivalesque comedy whose specific features were analysed in detail by Mikhail Bakhtin (1965: 302) in his study of the work of Rabelais, noting that “exaggeration, hyperbole, profusion, and excess are, of course, the most marked characteristic features” of this tradition. As noted above, the body plays a key role in this rhetoric of excess, a body whose impulses and contortions partly evoke what Bakhtin (1965: 27) refers to as the “principle of material and bodily life”⁷ central to the carnivalesque iconography. The subversive power of Loris’s everyday acts and gestures is also associated with this rich heritage: Bakhtin (1965: 19) demonstrates that the carnivalesque dynamic is “marked, among other things, by the original logic of ‘back to front’, ‘contradictory’ elements, high and low, front and back, by the most diverse forms of parodies, comic inversions, degradations, desecrations, culminations and demolitions.” The resistance of the protagonist who, from the fringes of the social body, attempts to undermine its mechanisms, also contributes to the satirical purpose of a film that is constructed around the principles of carnivalesque subversion and inversion. Benigni elaborates a caustic critique of an Italy in full political and economic mutation after several years of crisis:⁸ at the dawning of what the Italian media referred to as the Second Republic, he offers a picture of a society that enjoys a certain degree of apparent prosperity, but is dominated by the materialism, speculation and self-righteousness of the middle class to which all of his character’s adversaries belong (the elderly woman, the psychiatrist, the property manager, his neighbours, the antique dealers). The scene of Loris’ public speech at a property owners’ meeting, an obvious parody of Berlusconi’s tirades, clearly illustrates the subversive force of Benignian excess, whose

target here is one of the representatives of the new political class that emerged in the mid-1990s. Viscerally opposed to the initiatives voted for by the majority, Benigni’s anti-hero appears isolated once again as he addresses an irate crowd to defend himself against the numerous charges he has been accused of (assaulting the property manager, sticking gum in the locks, stealing garden gnomes and light bulbs from the common areas, etc.). The mismatch between the bombast of his speech, in keeping with Loris’s falseness, and the pettiness of the charges listed—all true, as the spectator has witnessed them in other sequences—debases and discredits the model being parodied: it is easy for the Italian audience to identify here the subverted oratory mechanisms of Silvio Berlusconi, the millionaire businessman who entered politics in 1994 and founded the centre-right party *Forza Italia*, ridiculed by Benigni, a leftist intellectual.

In addition to this satire of which Berlusconi is the target, in this scene, the man who became Prime Minister of Italy in the year the film was made, the story pokes fun more generally at the authorities as arbiters of the collective norm and guarantors of the social contract. To this end, the filmmaker sketches a carnivalesque picture of an inverted world in which these authorities are revealed to be far more disturbing than the “monster” himself. By allowing spectators to position themselves on the protagonist’s side from the outset, the interferences between the two narrative levels undermine the value of the dominant discourse established by the official powers. Based on a misinterpretation of the facts, the plan concocted jointly by the police chief and the psychiatric expert aims to subject Loris to a kind of psychological torture. Both the caricaturesque agitation of Chief Frustalupi, convinced that he has identified the killer after twelve years of searching, and Taccone’s unwavering conviction border on obsession and position the custodians of supposed legal, mental and behavioural normality in the realm of pathological deviation. In this respect,

Mileschi and Sacchelli (2006: 72-73) highlight the subversive force of this classification of the agents of order, which is typical of Benigni's films: "[t]his inversion of roles, in which the presumed mad-man embodies balance and the guarantors of the norm seem mentally unwell, is a constant of Benigni's filmography, and of burlesque in general." Hence the character of the psychiatric expert resembles a mad scientist, the creator of a theoretical monster conceived on the basis of fragmentary and deformed information through the systematic application of pseudo-scientific data. He assesses the suspect by means of various absurd physical and psychological tests (getting into Loris's home, for example, under the guise of a tailor in order to conduct a series of medical examinations), the effectiveness of which he never questions, even after the identity of the real psychopath is revealed.

These interpretative delusions of the authorities, which serve as the driving force for the subversive excess and the cornerstone of the story, offer a subtle criticism of moral repression in a contemporary society asphyxiated by conservatism. Indeed, the police chief and the psychiatrist base their theories on the postulate that any response to a sexual stimulus is a symptom of moral monstrosity—an objectively debatable postulate, as pointed out by one of the police officers summoned by the chief at the beginning of the film. Meanwhile, as noted above, the seducer Pascucci insists on the importance of never giving into a woman who makes a play for a man, even if this means subjecting the male body to an all-consuming frustration. This obsessive collective struggle against the most natural of instincts invites the spectator to question whether the source of monstrous criminal behaviour does not in fact lie in the excessively repressive nature of Italian society itself. Guided by Jessica, the only figure of moderation and lucidity, the authorities and the spectator discover at the end of the story that the killer is none other than Loris's Chinese teacher; in other words, an apparently good-natured man

integrated into the social body, but in whom compliance with rigid moral norms has ended up engendering a severe neurosis, to the point of rendering him incapable of containing his most basic drives, thereby awakening his inner monster.

Beyond this social satire, it is worth commenting on metadiscursive resonances of a critical reflection that extends to the creation of the film narrative itself. By developing two independent narrative levels that progress along their respective tracks until, through Jessica, a final junction is established that facilitates the revelation of the truth, Benigni raises the fundamental question of the creation of film fiction, as he himself has explained (Mileschi and Sacchelli, 2006: 165). The scene of the screening organised at the police station by Taccone and Frustalupi (Image 6) is particularly significant: in this sequence we see images from Loris's everyday life, filmed in the street by a hidden camera and edited in such a way that they perfectly corroborate the psychiatrist's theory about the sexual deviations of the alleged "Monster", which have all the police officers present at the meeting leaving the room in horror. On a second level of interpretation, the editing of these images could be considered a metaphor for the filmmaker's manipulation of the spectator, who is presented with images of a reality filtered by the camera lens, cut and worked over, the pieces of which are arranged according to the director's whim. In the end, isn't the filmmaker himself rather like the authorities in the story, capable of elaborating his own fiction based on a fragmentary and inevitably deforming—monstrous—recreation of reality?

Essentially, Benigni examines the resources of excess through the lens of monstrosity, in a comedy that is intimately linked to the political and economic context of mid-90s Italy: in a climate of recovery from an economic crisis whose ashes barely conceal the reality of unemployment, the collective angst aroused by the atrocities of the psychopath resounds with the horror that a

materialist society feels towards those who are unable to consume. This decoding of the satire reveals that the fear of the monster is tied to the rejection of the unemployed individual, who is completely marginalised by the community. From the fringes to which he is condemned, the jester Loris, an individualist by necessity, acts to destabilise the foundations of life in society. His excesses involve not merely a transgression of normative boundaries, but a genuine subversion of the established order that attempts to repress and even eliminate him. Indeed, it is no accident that Jessica, the only reasonable person in the diegesis, helps Loris in his everyday survival tactics and, in the film's epilogue, ends up in a romantic relationship with him. If the spectator is easily able to accept the idea that an agent of the law could allow herself to stray from the supposed right path it is because the story, in its carnivalesque logic, prevents her from adhering to the definitions of normal established by the powers that be. Combined with the *mise-en-scène* of the burlesque body, the strategies of exaggeration and inversion deployed by Benigni expose the abnormalities of contemporary Italian society, which is the real monster portrayed in the film. The filmmaker deconstructs its aberrant mechanisms of repression through the deforming lens of excess, thereby developing the kind of social critique he hinted at in his first comedy, *Berlinguer, I Love You*,⁹ in which the young Mario Cioni, seduced by the sirens of communism, is a direct victim of the moral repression of a Tuscan society torn between modernisation and traditionalism, and shaken by the socio-political upheavals of the late 1970s. Two decades later, it is tempting to view Loris as an evolution of Mario Cioni and as an embodiment of the Benignian jester's disillusionment over the failure of the communitarian ideal in Italy at the end of the twentieth century. ■



Image 6. Screening at the police station: manipulation of images of Loris taken secretly

NOTES

- 1 Although it goes beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that Benigni's artistic development has been profoundly influenced by Italian poetry: his work draws from the sources of the founding fathers of Italian literature, like Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and *Dolce Stil Nuovo*, Petrarch (1304-1374), and Boccaccio (1313-1375), but also contemporary poets like Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970), Dino Campana (1885-1932), and Eugenio Montale (1896-1981), among others. Indeed, the *Divine Comedy* inspired Benigni's successful one-man show *Tutto Dante*, which he toured from 2006 to 2013, and which combined analysis of the famous medieval poem with satirical reflections on contemporary Italy. For an analysis of the actor-filmmaker and the sources of his work, see Parigi, 1989; Masi, 1999; Borsatti, 2002.
- 2 These include Giuseppe Bertolucci, Federico Fellini, Jim Jarmusch, Blake Edwards and, most recently, Woody Allen.
- 3 The nickname is very probably an allusion to the Monster of Florence, a serial killer who terrorised the Florentine population from 1968 to 1985. For a chronicle of this episode of Tuscan history, see Fiorucci (2012).
- 4 "Ma non dovete pensare che sia un uomo orrendo e schifoso. Egli è sicuramente un tipo comune, qualunque. Il problema è che dietro a quella maschera di banalità, c'è un

violentatore, c'è un vizioso, c'è un uomo avido di sesso là dietro a quella maschera di uomo per bene. C'è un mostro" (translation by author).

- 5 "Un comportamento poco consono alla civile convivenza democratica" (translation by author).
- 6 "Vaffanculo alla maggioranza!" (Translation by author).
- 7 It is important to highlight, however, that while sex (and the frustrations it generates in this case) plays a prominent part in this feature film, Benigni's physical approach here precludes that other dimension of carnivalesque excess, scatology, celebrated by various other characters in his filmography, in *Berlinguer, I Love You* (Berlinguer, ti voglio bene, 1977), or *The Little Devil*, for example. Some authors have in fact studied the representation of the body in Benigni's work through the prism of the obscene, omnipresent in the first creations and portrayals of the actor-filmmaker. On this point, see Consentino (1998).
- 8 On the upheavals that have led Italy to constantly reinvent its democratic program, see Colarizi (2007) and Lazar (2008).
- 9 Co-written by Roberto Benigni and Giuseppe Bertolucci, and directed by the latter.

REFERENCES

- Amiel, V. (1998). *Le Corps au cinéma: Keaton, Bresson, Casavetes*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Bakhtin, M. (1965). *L'Œuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen-Âge et sous la Renaissance*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Borsatti, C. (2002). *Roberto Benigni*. Milan: Il Castoro cinema.
- Celli, M. (2001). *The Divine Comic: The Cinema of Roberto Benigni*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- Colarizi, S. (2007). *Storia politica della Repubblica: partiti, movimenti e istituzioni: 1943-2006*. Rome: Laterza.
- Consentino, A. (1998). *La scena dell'osceno: alle radici della drammaturgia di Roberto Benigni*. Rome: Odradek.
- Corbin, A. (2005). *De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*. Paris: Seuil (Collection Histoire du corps, Vol. 2).
- Dreux, E. (2007). *Le Cinéma burlesque ou la subversion par le geste*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Fiorucci, A. (2012). *48 small. Il dottore di Perugia e il mostro di Firenze*. [n.p.]: Morlacchi.
- Foucault, M. (1999). *Cours du 22 janvier 1975*. In V. Marchetti y A. Salomoni (eds.), *Les Anormaux. Cours au Collège de France, 1974-1975* (pp. 37-54). Paris: Édition de l'École des Hautes Études/Seuil/Gallimard.
- Governi, G. (2017). *Totò. Vita, opere e miracoli*. [n.p.]: Fazi.
- Král, P. (1984). *Le Burlesque ou Morale de la tarte à la crème*. Paris: Stock.
- Lazar, M. (2008). *L'Italie sur le fil du rasoir: changements et continuités de l'Italie contemporaine*. Paris: Perrin.
- Masi, S. (1999). *Roberto Benigni*. Rome: Gremese.
- Mileschi, C., Sacchelli, O. (2006). *Le Clown amoureux: l'œuvre cinématographique de Roberto Benigni*. Lyon: La Fosse aux Ours.
- Parigi, S. (1989). *Roberto Benigni*. Naples: Ed. Scientifiche Italiane.
- Vigarello, G. (2005). *De la Renaissance aux Lumières*. Paris: Seuil (Collection Histoire du corps, Vol. 1).

SLAPSTICK AND MONSTROSITIES: A RHETORIC OF EXCESS IN THE COMIC FILMS OF ROBERTO BENIGNI

Abstract

In 1994, Roberto Benigni directed the comedy of errors *The Monster* (*Il Mostro*), whose protagonist, the marginalised Loris, becomes the target of an erroneous police investigation as monstrous as the serial killer the authorities suspect him of being throughout the story. Like the director's four previous feature films, this picture is centred on the burlesque figure of the jester, who embodies a rhetoric of excess that Benigni uses to paint a caustic picture of 1990s Italy and its dysfunctions. This article examines this rhetoric of excess, which is based on a constant questioning of the normality/monstrosity dialectic. The excesses of Benigni's character position him on the fringes of a society against which he struggles in vain, using the resistance of the burlesque body to oppose the repressive social norms whose guarantors want to confine him in the territory of the monstrous. His literally eccentric position turns him into an excessive figure who is prepared to transgress the foundational pact of the social body. Indeed, Italian society is the main target of Benigni's satire in a film that combines burlesque mechanisms and carnivalesque strategies to expose the aberrations of the established order and the monstrously manipulative power of its agents.

Key words

Italian Cinema; Roberto Benigni; Monstrosity; Excess; Normality; Jester; Comedy.

Author

Diane Bracco (b. Limoges, 1987) is a member of the Department of Iberian and Iberian-American Studies at the University of Limoges. She completed the *Agrégation* in the Spanish language and holds a Ph.D. in Hispanic Studies from Université Paris 8, with a thesis analysing excess in Spanish cinema of the democratic area. She has written various articles and papers on Spanish directors such as Pedro Almodóvar, Bigas Luna, Álex de la Iglesia, Pablo Berger, and Santiago Segura. Her research is currently focused on cinematographic connections between Italy and Spain.. Contact: diane.bracco@unilim.fr.

Article reference

Bracco, D. (2019). Slapstick and Monstrosities: A Rhetoric of Excess in the Comic Films of Roberto Benigni. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 175-186.

BUFONADAS Y MONSTRUOSIDADES: UNA RETÓRICA DEL EXCESO EN EL CINE CÓMICO DE ROBERTO BENIGNI

Resumen

En 1994, Roberto Benigni dirige la comedia de malentendidos *El monstruo* (*Il mostro*) cuyo protagonista, el marginal Loris, es víctima de un error judicial tan monstruoso como el asesino en serie por quien le toman las autoridades italianas a lo largo del relato fílmico. Como los anteriores films del cineasta, esta quinta película se polariza en torno a la figura burlesca del bufón, encarnación de una escritura de la desmesura que Benigni pone al servicio de una pintura corrosiva de la Italia de los noventa y de sus disfunciones. Se tratará precisamente de examinar los mecanismos de dicha retórica del exceso, fundamentada en un cuestionamiento constante de la dialéctica normalidad/monstruosidad. Los desbordamientos del personaje benigniano lo inscriben al margen de una comunidad contra la cual lucha vanamente, oponiendo la resistencia del cuerpo burlesco a las represivas normas sociales cuyos depositarios se empeñan en confinarlo en el territorio de lo monstruoso. Su situación literalmente excéntrica lo convierte en una figura excesiva, que no duda en transgredir el pacto fundador del cuerpo social. De hecho, la sociedad italiana se encuentra en el centro de la sátira plasmada por Benigni en una cinta donde estrategias carnavalescas y resortes burlescos se combinan para denunciar las aberraciones del orden establecido y el monstruoso poder de manipulación de sus representantes.

Palabras clave

Cine italiano; Roberto Benigni; monstruosidad; exceso; normalidad; bufón, comedia.

Autora

Diane Bracco (Limoges, 1987) es profesora en el Departamento de Estudios Ibéricos e Iberoamericanos en la Universidad de Limoges. Es titular de la *Agrégation* de lengua española (oposición a cátedra de instituto para docentes de Educación Secundaria) y doctora en Estudios Hispánicos por la Universidad París 8, con una tesis dedicada al exceso en el cine español de la democracia. Es autora de diversos artículos y ponencias sobre directores españoles, como Pedro Almodóvar, Bigas Luna, Álex de la Iglesia, Pablo Berger o Santiago Segura. Actualmente, investiga sobre las filiaciones cinematográficas entre Italia y España. Contacto: diane.bracco@unilim.fr.

Referencia de este artículo

Bracco, D. (2019). Bufonadas y monstruosidades: una retórica del exceso en el cine cómico de Roberto Benigni. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 175-186.

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com