

THE WORLD OF CIPRÌ & MARESCO: A TRIBUTE TO A DEGRADED TERRITORY*

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INTRODUCTION

The fruitful collaboration between the Palermo-born directors Daniele Ciprì and Franco Maresco over nearly two decades (1989-2008) resulted in one of the most subversive, brilliant, and consistent filmographies seen in Italy in recent years. To discover their work is to enter a new territory, where a war is waged against the prevailing homogenisation of the film and television markets. Their work features openly carnal characters who attend obsessively to their immediate physical desires, and whose extreme cynicism reflects a profound malaise. They are bodies lacking a narrative, vestiges of a humanity with nothing left to do but linger. All of this is framed in an extremely unique setting, in keeping with an existential void distinguished by the absence of past and future, marked by a number of common features that collectively contribute to the depiction of a collapsed world, either for their intrinsic val-

ue or for the way they are represented: buildings in ruins, outskirts and slums, industrial archaeology, skies, and the horizon. The settings are barren, unexplored places, located on the fringes and filmed from the fringes, bearing witness to a degradation resulting from neglect and the passage of time, which constitute an excrescence, remnants that demand nothing, thereby acquiring the symbolic power of all forms of resistance.

A DEGRADED TERRITORY

To create a world, it is necessary first of all to form an earth and a sky. On the earth, men will walk; and in the sky, perhaps, the gods will dwell (Foranara, 1998: 3). In this sense, Ciprì & Maresco can boast of having established, in their “anarchic filmography made of solid apparitions” (Ghezzi, 2011: 495), a cinematic cosmos in which they can admire their own creations: creatures of flesh and blood who seem to have arisen out of subhuman

mud, out of a shadowy underworld where insanity and frailty create a strange and feckless amalgam; creatures that wander aimlessly, lurching, singing, dancing, masturbating, defecating, fornicating with animals or simply standing still under the effects of a chronic neural short circuit. And all these creatures inhabit a diverse range of desolate and at the same time revealing settings, in a post-atomic chaos where the worst conjectures have come to pass and where the ruins remain intact against all expectations, symbolising a world showing signs of resistance while at the same time suggesting a yearning for a reality that no longer exists (Morreale, 2003: 47). In these interstices between rural archaism and urbanised modernism, Cipri & Maresco challenge spectators to reflect on the function served by both physical and ideological boundaries, depicting a setting in which we can no longer view the countryside from the edges of the city, and where nature is not identified as something in need of protection or celebration, but as a scarred, resistant entity that may very well outlive humanity. The filmmakers thus invite us to question our role in the changes to our natural environment, and to become conscious of our own actions (Seger, 2015: 22-23).

Clearly, these are settings that call for special attention. It is hardly surprising that some critics, impressed by their mises-en-scene and the beauty of the locations, have identified references to John Ford in these landscapes, suggesting that the outskirts of Palermo are Cipri & Maresco's own personal Monument Valley (Malanga, 1999: 58). The use of black and white, a meticulous framing and a grainy lens filter offer an expansive and at the same time oppressed view of the territory. The weeds, combined with the rough and barren terrain, convey the sensation that some cata-

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strophic event has taken place, and invites us to ponder on the difficulty of survival in such harsh circumstances.

Essential to a scene like the one described is one of the fundamental visual motifs in the films of Cipri & Maresco, an

iconic image for any civilisation contemplating its own decline: the building in ruins.

RUINS

Since the early 20th century, in response to the looming possibility of global annihilation, cinema has indulged in its taste for prophesy with imaginary threats that have sought to show what might become of humankind. These scenarios have been based on a reaction to the catastrophic repercussions of the erosion of time, natural disasters, or humankind's own violent actions. In this sense, photography and cinema have played essential roles in depicting the most devastating consequences and indulging our shock and fascination with destruction and the havoc it wreaks (Hispano, 2005: 173-183).

Nevertheless, cinema is a multitude of events and landscapes, of stories that always need to be located in space, and in this sense it is reasonable to think of such spaces as stages for stories, i.e., as the cinema's theatre-landscape that can end up becoming real landscape-theatre (Turri, 1998: 121). In Cipri & Maresco's films, the symbiosis of ruinous buildings and bodies consequently invites us to predefine and articulate an apocalyptic world thanks to the predictive game proposed by the powerful imaginary of cinema. The ruins through which their characters wander are real places, products of the apathy, neglect, and powerlessness of humankind, and testimonies to the inexorable and insatiable passage of time. The re-

sult is an imperturbable calmness that acts as a form of resistance, drawing us irrevocably away from the imaginary of cardboard cut-outs and digital dreams of conventional cinema (Hispano, 2005: 183). In the work of these two Sicilian directors, the depiction of this imaginary effectively acclimatizes our eyes to the scene, adapting us to its coordinates and immersing us in the abstraction of the image, showing us how the characters move in a vast space that is the only one possible. It is a space that carries two meanings: a nostalgic fascination for the constructions conceived by human genius; and an extraordinary wonderment, accompanied by an equal degree of fascination, for the destructive potential of Nature, Time, and Man (Argullol, 2000: 23). The revelation possesses a tone of bitterness and despair, but also of cynicism, suggesting an interpretation of the world as a battlefield where the rise of the new comes into conflict with the lingering presence of old things clearly in their death throes.

Much of the film *Lo zio di Brooklyn* [The Uncle from Brooklyn] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1995) consists of exterior scenes. The characters move through rubbish tips, contemplate pestilential riverbanks, lean against walls that offer no protection, pose in front of crumbling façades, engage in bestiality in vacant lots, trudge along roads leading nowhere, walk coffins down empty avenues and streets filled with rubble, and stare at us from leaden landscapes covered with penetratingly barren expanses. In this incessant pilgrimage, they show how wandering is a kind of searching without knowing what you are looking for, following unforeseen roads, because “the wanderer knows that the place where nobody awaits you is the very place you should head for” (Calvo, 2019: 31-32). In this apotheosis of desolation, the building in ruins acts as an inoculation against a private stupor. We are presented with the grotesque dimension of “a world in a state of alienation”; in other words, a world “that at one time looked familiar and reliable but that has

suddenly revealed its strange and unsettling nature to us” (Kayser, 2010: 309-310). We can find another example of this unsettling wandering in the dilapidated constructions in *Senza titolo* [Untitled] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1993), a piece executed in a single wide shot that includes the figure of Marcello Miranda—one of Cipri & Maresco’s recurring actors—naked from the waist up, looking down on an inhospitable landscape, enthroned on a mound of rubble opposite a house whose lifeless façade is all that remains of it. A jazz tune is the only lively element of the



Image 01. *Senza titolo* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1993)



Image 02. *Ritorno alla vecchia casa* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1996)

scene, resulting in a strange paradox due to the clash between the image and the type of music we hear. The characters are located in a world of hazily defined contours, subject to neither rules nor obligations. They live with a kind of lightness, free from bureaucratic processes and constraints, in what could be described as a state of weightlessness. They are in a sense “floating characters” (Imbert, 2010; 39). [Image 01; Image 02]

In *Ritorno alla vecchia casa* [Return to the Old House] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1996), a short, two-minute piece, we witness two characters approaching a half-collapsed house that seems to act as a force of attraction in the same way that live flesh can draw a pack of zombies. On the journey there, shown in static shots, not a soul is seen, as if the whole neighbourhood had been evacuated due to some contagious virus. Not only is there no life, but decrepitude and sickness seem to emanate from the amputated state of the buildings, the absence of doors and windows, and façades that look like the gaping wounds of the dying. As the first character gets closer, we see the second (played by Marcello Miranda), always with his back to us, entering the house slowly. The atonal notes of a violin reinforce the sense of mystery in an apparently open ending which, far from reflecting the exploratory, thoughtful wanderings of the *flâneur*, merely illustrates the characters’ state of angst and paralysis in the environment that surrounds and engulfs them. The building in ruins becomes the ideal place to pass through without giving up one’s own inner exile.

SLUMS AND OUTSKIRTS

Cipri & Maresco’s characters reside in physical and symbolic spaces that do not act as obvious identity markers, as they aim for a universal application. We know that we are in the outskirts of Palermo, and often we can even see Monte Pellegrino in the background of the scene, like a timeless witness testifying to the territory that their creatures in-

habit; and yet, it is not necessary to know the history of decay and degeneration that has marked the most undervalued and neglected neighbourhoods of the Sicilian capital. In this sense, these are obscure, blurred landscapes that act as metaphors for questions of history and time, as they often lack a human presence and offer no references that could tie them to a particular moment in history (Seger, 2015: 128), resulting in a decontextualisation that ultimately breaks all physical and temporal barriers to offer a universal discourse.

In his description of 20th-century European cities through cinema, Pierre Sorlin analyses the reflection (both real and artificial) of cities in film, and examines how as early as the 1910s European filmmakers began taking a real interest in the representation of cities, as it was then that avant-garde directors first started trying to depict them with as many images as possible so that audiences might understand the infinitely rich variety of details they contained (Sorlin, 1996: 114). In his overview of this evolution of urban representation, Sorlin points out that it was only after 1930 that cities began being described as clearly defined spatial totalities that are distinguished by opposition (in terms of images, not of geography) and that demarcate the two quintessential extremes: centre and periphery (Sorlin, 1996: 114). It is important to note, however, that such moments in films were not intended to offer faithful descriptions of the outlying areas, but simply to indicate some of their specific features (Sorlin, 1996: 115-116). It was not until the emergence of Neorealism, with its interest in using settings in the outskirts of major cities to tell stories of workers and ordinary people driven by a desire to improve their standard of living that filmmakers became more serious about seeking out suitable (and always real) locations where they could set their stories. This change of direction reflected a need to take back these territories, to make them inhabitable once again after the tragedy of the Second World War. But this rediscovery of life in the phase of reconstruction

to restore balance and democracy was no easy road, as it involved attempting to establish a field of action that would make it possible to work on locations where characters lived their everyday lives, subjected to laws unknown to them, to forced adaptation and tragic rootlessness (Sorlin, 1996: 117-118). This is a landscape represented with such heightened intensity that it ultimately takes on the quality of a co-protagonist (Melanco, 2005: 51), resulting in the establishment of an intimate relationship between the landscape and the human being who inhabits it (Melanco, 2005: 44). The raw and sordid descriptions of reality gave this type of filmmaking a documentary tone, although this was in no way intended to play down its artistic dimension. Audiences were thus encouraged to discover and consider the contrasting and contradictory aspects of contemporary life, always according to very specific aesthetic principles: “the use of a real context, a rejection of sensationalism, and a desire to transform society” (Quintana, 1997: 100). [Image 03; Image 04]

A question that needs to be raised at this point is whether the peripheral settings in the

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filmography of Cipri & Maresco really perform a social function as they did in Neorealism, or whether instead they act merely as a backdrop for apathetic characters who wander with no clear idea of where they are going or why. Indeed, what direction should they

take in an urban landscape with no clear centre? In any case, it is difficult to decontextualise these subhuman figures from an environment that initially seems both intrinsic and at the same time indifferent to them. While the characters of Neorealism build, furnish, and care for their home, in an effort to secure their dignity (Eliade, 1985: 54) and always with a sense of community, Cipri & Maresco's monsters feel no connection or attachment whatsoever to the territory they find themselves in. It could be argued that they wander around the edges of the edges, places created out of a rejection of business transactions, economic exploitation, leisure routes, sightseeing tours, and information flows; in other words, unusual places where a force against cohabitation and coexistence can be concealed and exerted (Calvo, 2019: 161-162).



Image 03. *Venerdì Santo - Sabato Santo - Domenica di Pasqua* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1992)



Image 04. *Cinico TV* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1989-1996)

As a core element of the black and white images, both interiors (homes, factories, caves, chapels) and exteriors (beaches, cliffs, riverbanks, rubbish tips, roads), the peripheral, run-down outskirts of Palermo seem to be the only possible setting for these bodies moulded by the garbage that surrounds them, who bear the weight of solitude without seeking any pity, ready to offer up their flesh to the void of existence.

INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Abandoned industrial plants, dilapidated old factories, dusty warehouses, ramshackle garages, smokestacks resembling Kubrickian monoliths, industrial parks filled with rubbish and rats, and sewers clogged with waste. A simple glance at the interiors and exteriors of these settings reinforces our shock at a civilisation unable to put things right, annihilated by its own nightmares of progress.

In *Seicortosei* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1991), a tableau of six short pieces in which the two directors scatter their characters around different degraded locations in Palermo's industrial periphery, we find an example of the oppression arising from the evocation of better times, when human activity had a function, a goal and a meaning. Prominent in the first piece, *Oreto Ovest*, shot on the banks of the depleted Oreto River, are the abandoned industrial parks, scrap metal, and junk heaps. The disillusioned characters don't seem to be merely passing through, as they gaze intently at something far-off that is out of the spectator's view. In the third of the pieces, *Il deserto dei Gobbì*, two hunchbacks stare at each other with an unsettling stillness underscored by the huge circular warehouses that loom in the background like mere spectators to a mythical encounter, as if what we were seeing was some kind of duel. In *Deposito n°38*, we are immersed in an industrial atmosphere that becomes increasingly oppressive as we move from one impeccably precise shot to the next. The characters, posing like marble



Image 05. *Seicortosei* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1996)



Image 06. *Seicortosei* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1996)

statues, acquire an immortal quality, reinforced by the light that strikes and sculpts them. It is a form of industrial archaeology that functions as a backdrop with the quality of a museum, a place for genuine freaks to wander around and amaze us. [Image 05; Image 06]

Industrial archaeology can adopt multiple forms and its constructions can house the worst nightmares. Moreover, in the Sicilian context, where the shadow of the Mafia looms everywhere, our reading of such constructions is contaminated by deeper connotations. For example, the fact that the Mafia has reached its tentacles

into the age-old but ever-flourishing funeral industry doesn't go unnoticed by this Sicilian directorial duo, who sometimes choose settings in warehouses filled with coffins and other macabre symbols, creating an atmosphere that suits the characters perfectly. Indeed, some scenes—*Lo zio di Brooklyn*; the Abbate brothers in *Cinico TV* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Ciprì, 1989-1996)—take place amid immense columns of coffins arranged in the most diverse ways. In this troublingly asphyxiating context, lacking in air or where the air has become unbreathable, the anxiety of destruction is rendered fully explicit: visitors, astonished by the spectacle of the underworld, are given the violent impression of “prisons of time” (Argullol, 2000: 28), in a clear metaphor for the spectre of the secret criminal organisations that had Sicily as their birthplace.

At the same time, it is clear that industrial archaeology can also serve as an ideal space to perpetrate and conceal the most shameful crimes. These constructions are remote, spacious, and silent places where screams can echo and fade in the distance; gloomy and filthy places where the material (asbestos, cement, metal) offers a radical counterpoint to the colour, texture, and smell of flesh, of an intimate human frailty that shrinks and flounders.

In the third episode of *Totò che visse due volte* [Totò Who Lived Twice] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Ciprì, 1998), the angel, after singing an *a capella* rendition of the Neapolitan song “*O bene mio*” (by Pino Mauro, written with Vincenzo Corrales), is raped by three half-naked, pot-bellied characters who lay in wait for him inside an industrial building with a collapsed ceiling, like three gatekeepers at the gates of hell itself. While it is true that the angel is considered a being without a body and therefore asexual, it is equally true

that to manifest himself on Earth he must adopt a physical appearance (Toldrà, 2012: 96); indeed, shortly beforehand we have seen the Cipri & Maresco angel, perhaps the most earthly angel of all, defecate in the bushes; thus, the same orifice serves both as an exit and an entrance. Wedged against the wall, the angel is sodomised by three beasts. Then suddenly, a lame man appears, who is explicitly shown masturbating in a corner of the caved-in building. The three pot-bellied men encourage him to join the party and he obeys with a deranged smile. In the midst of all this, Cipri & Maresco consciously manipulate the images: slowing them down, reducing their quality (the film grain becomes more visible) and increasing the contrast. The figures acquire a monumental

texture, like spectres in some maleficent dimension. Without the need to be explicit, the filmmakers construct a rough, claustrophobic, asphyxiating sequence that is difficult to watch. The helplessness of the angel, subjected to abuse with the forbearance of a Christian martyr, contrasts with the thrusting mechanical movements and

impassive faces of the rapists, the hands that hold down his arms and wings, and the frenzy of the lame man. The soundtrack, which is only the reverberating song of the angel, becomes ironic here and reshapes the evocation of pain in the echo of the moans. If angels are spiritual beings, we are witnessing a true desecration. The space accentuates the desolation of the victim and reduces any chance of escape. This scene, so shocking in both form and content, will not be the only vision of desecration of Christian symbols in this film. [Image 07]

However, it is important to remember that the obsolete industrial buildings and machinery situate us fully within the paradigm of a peripheral,

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Image 07. *Totò che visse due volte* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1998)

subproletarian culture, which ties in directly with the Pasolinian assertion of underdevelopment as a model of resistance in the fight against the homogenising effect of the petite bourgeoisie (Fofi, 1999: 36), in *Keller* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1991), a short piece in a post-industrial style, the filmmakers play with the potential confusion of the title with the word “killer”. We witness a lateral tracking shot moving left along the outer walls of a Sardinian factory—located in Carini, a town near Palermo—dedicated to the construction of train carriages.¹ The slow, steady movement of the camera, which comes up against different self-engrossed characters scattered around the scene, is accompanied by the sound of jazz music that recalls certain suspenseful scenes of *film noir*. The characters, once again static, lethargic, and apathetic, progressively reinforce the spectator’s unease, right up to the critical moment when Marcello Miranda, the very last character shown, after maintaining his typically wistful pose for a few moments, raises his head, looks at the camera and laughs absurdly. The behaviour of the characters, all men of working age, positioned around the perimeter of the factory, prompts the spectator to reflect on the high unemployment rates and the corruption of union leaders and employers that has always afflicted Sicily.

Similarly, in *Lontane* [Far Away] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1993) there is an evocation of work and the frantic activity of factories through the contrast provided by images of desolation, ruin, and abandonment. Among these, the human figure, represented by a completely motionless Marcello Miranda, appears as a triviality incapable of combating the relentless devastation of time and progress.

As in other cases, the material vestiges left by men of other generations represent the ideal habitat for characters doomed by inertia to contemplate their own tombs: a sinking world which, as it crumbles, buries a humanity in decline that nevertheless stubbornly remains standing.

INTERIORS

Maresco & Cipri’s interior shots are generally in rubble-filled, collapsing houses, usually abandoned, with no doors, windows, or roofs, where the characters enter and exit at will. Or they may be in crumbling churches stripped of ornamentation, ransacked by men or by a cosmic wind; or in uninhabited housing blocks, located on dead roads cut off from the urban centres, settings that reflect the repercussions of Mafia speculation.

A grim scene of this kind included in *Cinico TV* can be found in the episode “*Adotta anche tu un siciliano*” [You Too Can Adopt a Sicilian], which imitates the television ads produced by NGOs, and which features much of the usual troupe of figures in Cipri & Maresco’s films. In a dining room filled with useless objects (a broken TV set that the cyclist portrayed by Francesco Tirone uses to lean on; a small table that seems to serve mainly as an obstacle; piles of newspapers gathering

dust), the four characters, in passive and despondent postures, each hold an empty soup bowl. The prolonged wide shot allows us to see how the wall in the background, its plaster peeling, fuses with the bodies of the characters. What forms part of what? The playing with lines, enhanced by the light shining through the window and the shadows of the window frames on the wall to the right, along with the stacks of papers in the foreground that seem to close off any conventional exit (suggesting that the best means of escape would be by jumping out the window), create an impending feeling of claustrophobic anxiety aggravated all the more by the music composed by Nino Rota for *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), which is used for the soundtrack. The message is crystal clear: one man's misery is the product of another man's vandalism. It is an outdated, ironic way of denouncing a crime without mentioning names. [Image 08]

The indoor shots are in dilapidated living spaces where the characters dwell in a profound and incurable state of depression. It is a simple and at the same time disturbing metaphor for what the world has become and how. The slovenliness of the characters, forced into leading a negative existence, results in the negligence and abandonment of the settings. Their constituent parts catch



Image 08. *Adotta anche tu un siciliano*, in *Cinico TV* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1989-1996).

our eye, reflecting a whole array of signs suggestive of a catastrophe. Apart from the inherent filth, the dirt, dust, and peeling walls create degraded backgrounds that act as defining contexts for characters who cannot decide whether to stay or go, whose imprisonment is simply their own inability to act, to rise up and fight. In contrast with Francis Bacon's characters, who move, merge and mutate in the rage wrought by existential pain, Cipri & Maresco's characters are petrified by the most atrocious resignation.

The spaces are thus not merely settings for action, but instead contribute actively to the stories (Sánchez-Biosca, 1990: 139). While the images suggest a certain theatricality, the settings are real, and Cipri & Maresco ingeniously recreate certain abstractions with areas of shadow alternated with light. The objective is for "objects to play an essential role, as they cease to be both decorative and functional for the action in order to acquire a precise symbolic meaning" (Sánchez-Biosca, 1990: 139). Just such a meaning is established through the arrangement of light and shadows in the brothel that is the workplace of La Tremmatori, a prostitute whose fellatio, in the words of one of the characters in *Totò che visse due volte*, is able to revive the dead. Cipri & Maresco focus the scene on the waiting room where clients wait impatiently, joking with each other while watching a heavy rainfall outside. The flashes of lightning cast shadows on the walls of the spider hanging from the ceiling and a chandelier in the shape of a crucifix, suggesting a dialogue between pleasure and sin through the sacrilegious use of symbols in settings stripped of all solemnity. The slanted and forced composition of the shots allows the filmmakers to construct an effectively grotesque scene in the purist Expressionist style: through distorted lines, shapes and depths, and thanks to the grating clash between light and shadows that can overload the *chiaroscuro* (Wolf, 2006: 22), the inanimate objects acquire a tragic human dimension. The entrance

of Paletta (Marcello Miranda) into the waiting room, drenched from head to foot, makes him the target of denigration. How? Through the resonant and humiliating laughter of the clients at the poor wretch's expense: in one of the shots, Paletta appears standing, leaning against the wall next to the shadow of the cross, foreshadowing his own personal Calvary. The laughter of La Tremmotori's regular customers is thus an expression of the executioners' delight: *Più soffri e più godiamo*. The result is an atmosphere created out of a profound interweaving of space, objects, and characters (Sánchez-Biosca, 1990: 139). [Image 09]

The Trinacria Cinematografica short film *La vita di santa Rosalia*, which the religious committee headed by Cardinal Sucato (played by the versatile Pietro Giordano) evaluates in *Il ritorno di Cagliostro* [The Return of Cagliostro] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Ciprì, 2003), is an exercise in chiaroscuros taken to the extreme, an irreverent homage to the Expressionist movement which, drawing on a universal source of mystery and obscurantism, emerges as the ideal counterpoint to depict the saint's miracle in a blasphemous tone. Throughout the film within a film, light and shadow oppose one another in violent patches, revealing a constant rupture of the space where the characters appear (even in scenes that attempt to imitate interior spaces, like grottos or caves), some of whom are dressed in immaculate white while others are in black to further enhance the dramatic effect. The symbolic elements (the clueless dog, the bonfire that does not burn, the scattered bones) ultimately soften the occultist and macabre presentation of the miracle of Palermo's patron saint and contribute to the formulation of a



Image 09. *Totò che visse due volte* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Ciprì, 1998)

profane and subversive version of the story that belongs to a cynical world designed to wipe out any hint of faith or hope.

SKIES AND HORIZONS

Transcendence, power, timelessness and the sacred, i.e., those things that no earthly being can ever attain, is revealed in the sky. The fact of its elevated height, its inaccessibility, evokes eternity and creative power, vesting it with the iconographic force of mystery, imbued with sanctity (Chevalier, 2007: 281). The clouds are an essential element of the image of the heights. Motionless and tense skies, swelling or swirling with cumulonimbus clouds, or heavy with a menacing nimbostratus. It is worth noting that the cloud symbolises various ideas that underscore its confusing and ill-defined nature (Chevalier, 2007: 756). A trail of clouds could mean the passage of a storm, or the presence (either threatening or hopeful) of major connections, but always foreshadowing the arrival of a change. It is no accident that the theme of clouds was of so much interest to the Romantic painters, who were attracted by the contradictory play of forces: whether in their celestial movements they are gathering or dissolving is not clear, but in any case they express the neurotic activity of the heavens.

For Cipri & Maresco, the skies function as a background on which to portray the heaviness, the density, and the oppression of external reality. There is a world outside the world—perhaps our own—that obscures and oppresses, that increases the force of gravity exponentially, that causes fatigue and drives its victims to the most radical and absolute idleness. While in Beckett's plays the outside world is undefined, in Cipri & Maresco it is described by a degraded, leaden vault, turned into a dream ascending into obscurity. The same grainy filters that Daniele Cipri uses in the dreary interior scenes of factories, warehouses, and grottoes acquire a supernatural, unreal tonality in the exteriors, giving them a kind of ecliptic dimension, where the drifting characters are subjected to threats and constraints that are paradoxically inert, non-violent, saturated with an extraordinary peace and stillness. No bombs fall, nor is there any sign of a clear and present danger. It is thus a threat that acquires the form of an omission: these creatures have been left behind, abandoned, and are nothing more than vestiges that claim our attention.

A sequence in *K* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1996)—a title with clearly Kafkaesque connotations that would later be included in *Grazie Lia. Breve inchiesta su Santa Rosalia* [Thanks Lia: A Short Survey on Santa Rosalía] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1996)—filmed in a long, static low-angle shot lasting nearly ten minutes, offers a view of an eerie factory whose smokestack rises up in an eloquent expression of phallic symbolism. Meanwhile, a battle between light and darkness is being waged in the overcast sky. The sight of this fierce struggle between natural powers that dominates the decaying industrial landscape recalls John Constable's *Cloud Study* (1821-1822) or Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Shade and Darkness* (1843), where the colours show nothing

less than the dialectical game played between antagonistic forces since the beginning of time. "The Sun is God" (Honour, 2007: 99), Turner would say, referring to his painting *Regulus* (1828-1837). Hugh Honour refines the definition: "But a cruel and jealous God" (Honour, 2007: 99). The struggle between good and evil, the pictorial conflict between light and shadow, might in the end be a neurotic malady or a mere whim of an entity beyond our control. Cipri & Maresco do nothing more than confirm it, never playing or faking a representation, but observing reality and portraying it at the very moment when miracles seem to illuminate the mystery.

In the short piece *Tre visioni* [Three Visions] (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1993), the jazz soundtrack also serves as a counterpoint to the long, static images of landscapes ostentatiously

shrouded in storm clouds. On the horizon looms the telluric force of the beautiful, imposing Monte Pellegrino, rising above the waters of the Mediterranean and drawing in the characters held paralysed in pensive poses. The horizon, the visual boundary where

earth and sky seem to be joined, is the identifying feature of the inhabitants of any island. [Image 10]

A similar sensation is evoked in the scene in *Cinico TV* where Marcello Miranda's character looks out over the sea from a desolate breakwater. It is a rainy day, and Miranda is holding a black, half-broken umbrella that the force of the wind makes it impossible to open properly. At intervals of around ten seconds, the camera moves in closer and closer to the shore. Miranda looks hesitant, as if he needs to find the courage to make a final decision. The directors astutely skip the character's movements to reinforce his impassive attitude to the approaching tragedy. The sea ripples gently and in the background we hear a romantic song as if it were playing on the radio

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REALITY**



Image 10. *Tre visioni* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1993)

of a nearby vehicle. Finally, in a slightly low-angled shot, we see the folded umbrella lying on the ground, alongside a pair of shoes, placed in a way that brings to mind the gait of Charlie Chaplin's Tramp. Meanwhile, in the background, the immensity of the sea stretches out mercilessly. This scene functions as a protest against the manipulative forces of the television medium that turn tragedy into a serial drama offered up in the form of episodes to an audience fascinated with catastrophes. But there is more to it: moving far away from the TV studios, everyday situations, and commercial displays, Cipri & Maresco underscore the solitude of man on the precipice in a literal, straightforward way. The visual motif of the horizon over the sea as an extension of the shore focuses our attention on the meaning of existence and prompts us to ask why things are as they are, in a context where "the ambivalence of the horizon, between hope and despair, is expressed in those sequences where the tremulous presence of death appears" (Balló, 2000: 197). Their power lies in a tradition that has explored this context from different perspectives to produce profound and enduring meanings like "the temptation of the void" (Balló, 2000: 201-203).

However, it is important to stress at this point that despite emphasising the visual motif of the horizon, these two Sicilian directors eschew dramatics, offering a basic tone that takes us away from Romanticism and its tragic conception and brings us into the coordinates of a world entrenched in a sublime cynicism. The desolation and marginalisation of their characters' fantasies are always evident, and the intransigence of their actions gives the joke loftier connotations, demonstrating that nothing is lifeless under the gaze of an eye impervious to hope and repelled by anything that is fanned by the flames of hope (Cioran, 2001: 114-115). [Image 11]

In a scene in the documentary *Grazie Lia. Breve inchiesta su Santa Rosalia*, Pietro Giordano, one of the most emblematic actors in Cipri & Maresco's work, dressed in tattered white underpants, stands alone with the majestic Monte Pellegrino, *il monte sacro*, looming behind him in the distance, praying to the patron saint of Palermo to grant him a miracle consisting in stopping the gossipers from calling him a "*pezzo di merda*". It is a scene that visually evokes Caspar David Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-1810), where the figure is dwarfed by the terrifying immensity that stretches out before him, in a painting that is in a sense pantheistic, where God pervades every corner of the image. In the same way, Cipri and Maresco's creatures look alienated from and dwarfed by the magnitude of the landscape; they do not belong entirely in their world or in ours, but exist on the edges of reality, in an originary world. According to Deleuze, these originary worlds can be characterised as much by the artificial nature of a stage set as by the authenticity of a preserved natural

THE HORIZON, THE VISUAL BOUNDARY WHERE EARTH AND SKY SEEM TO BE JOINED, IS THE IDENTIFYING FEATURE OF THE INHABITANTS OF ANY ISLAND

area. What is interesting about them is that they draw from a real environment to create a world of meaning that is “both radical beginning and absolute end,” accentuating the features of realism and “extending them in an idiosyncratic surrealism” (Deleuze, 2001: 124). In this world, the characters “are like animals [...] It is not because they have their form or behaviour, but because their acts are prior to all differentiation between the human and the animal. They are human animals” (Deleuze, 2001: 123-124). This is a concept that ties in with that of anthropogenesis, referring to the moment when the primate becomes human. It is an event that is never completed once and for all, but that is constantly ongoing: “human beings are always in the act of becoming human, and therefore, inherently, of remaining inhuman” (Agamben, 2019: 24). Indeed, Cipri & Maresco’s immobile and isolated *human animals* always seem to find themselves in the midst of nature and, at the same time, somehow outside it, feeling at once relaxed and uneasy, as symbols of ambiguity and alienation. Draped in strange robes or in ostentatiously immodest and outdated underwear, they could be described as being in a permanent state of prayer, or rather of *self-communion*, exploring realms located beyond the world of perception, worlds that

surpass all human understanding. They are like medieval mystics experiencing the same apocalyptic visions over and over again. The power of the sky expands the horizons towards the Whole and towards the Void, rendering the human figure tiny, ignored, and powerless against the storm that surrounds it, in a direct and unavoidable evocation of the Romantics, in whose landscapes the association between man and nature brings the universe to life (Honour, 2007: 92).

However, a simple noisy fart, a disgusting burp, blowing a raspberry, shouting a swear word at the sky, or any other obscene act can instantly undermine any of these Romantic allusions and return us to the primitive essence of the earth, where the beasts dwell, where the difference between animal and human, so essential to our culture and yet so susceptible to vanishing (Agamben, 2005: 35), seems to have disintegrated once and for all.

Cipri & Maresco’s creatures have certainly not conquered the sky, but they have gained an aura of immortality: they will never perish, because they are monsters created as a metaphor for human sufferings, weaknesses, and ineptitude. Creatures like these deserve a degraded space in keeping with their vagaries, and Cipri & Maresco have clearly given it to them.

CONCLUSIONS

It is a strange paradox that film and (especially) television should be the media that best convey the beauty of the degradation of a landscape that was once a paradise. Cipri & Maresco prove themselves capable of blending elegy and condemnation, beauty and degradation in a shocking way, demonstrating that the elements required to create an original cosmos lie within our scope of vision: all that is needed is to know how to identify them and bring them together accordingly. And they do this with a single purpose: to find an ideal territory for their creatures to inhabit. It is a territory in a



Image II. *Grazie Lia. Breve inchiesta su Santa Rosalia* (Franco Maresco & Daniele Cipri, 1996)

state of collapse, suspended in time, presented not just as a mere backdrop but as a way of reaching for the universal through the inoculating power of resistance. All together, these elements form part of a broader cosmological cartography that includes a physicality and a repertoire of acts that are highly obscene. What might be considered a deviation or an excess of carnality is thus depicted not as an artificial, anomalous characteristic, or a dramatised attempt to constrain human bodies, but quite the opposite: the inherent quality of bodies that effectively merge with their environment in a familiar and unsettling way. ■

THEY ARE MONSTERS CREATED AS A METAPHOR FOR HUMAN SUFFERINGS, WEAKNESSES, AND INEPTITUDE

NOTES

- * This article was inspired by some of the issues explored in the doctoral thesis titled *La resistència del buit. Ruïna, cos i gest obscè en l'obra de Ciprì i Maresco* (The Resistance of the Void: Ruin, Body and Obscene Act in the Films of Ciprì & Maresco), directed by Dr. Iván Pintor Iranzo and defended in February 2016 in the Department of Communication at Universidad Pompeu Fabra.
- 1 The factory, located in Carini, a town near Palermo, was struck by an earthquake in November 2014, after many years of ups and downs ("La Keller è fallita", 2014).

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THE WORLD OF CIPRÌ & MARESCO: A TRIBUTE TO A DEGRADED TERRITORY

Abstract

This article explores the territory occupied by the characters in the work of Sicilian directors Daniele Ciprì and Franco Maresco, who for years collaborated to build one of the most subversive and disturbing filmographies on the Italian—and European—scene. As their contributions to both cinema and television have been extensive, this study is limited to the analysis of a few pieces and excerpts that reveal how the degradation of the landscape and the visual motif of the building in ruins serve as pillars in the construction of their particular universe. The periphery and the outskirts, industrial archaeology, disordered interiors, and a certain texture of the sky and the horizon are some of the settings that participate as characters in their own right, framing the aimless wanderers who people their films.

Key words

Ciprì & Maresco; Ruins; Industrial Archaeology; Periphery; Sky; Resistance; Grotesque; Horizon.

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EL MUNDO DE CIPRÌ Y MARESCO. UN ELOGIO AL TERRITORIO DEGRADADO

Resumen

El presente artículo realiza una exploración del territorio que ocupan los personajes de la obra de los directores sicilianos Daniele Ciprì y Franco Maresco, que durante años colaboraron para edificar una de las filmografías más subversivas e inquietantes del panorama italiano y europeo. Teniendo en cuenta que su contribución tanto en el cine como en la televisión es extensa, se analizan algunas piezas y fragmentos que permiten observar cómo la degradación del territorio y el motivo visual de la ruina son pilares en la constitución de su particular universo. La periferia y los suburbios, la arqueología industrial, los interiores descuidados y una determinada textura del cielo y el horizonte son algunos de los escenarios que participan como un personaje más, abrazando unas criaturas que deambulan sin rumbo fijo.

Palabras clave

Ciprì y Maresco; ruina; arqueología industrial; periferia; cielo; resistencia; grotesco; horizonte.

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