

Italian Film Directors in the New Millennium

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Edited by

William Hope

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of John Bernard Hope.

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FOREWORD

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH

Throughout the generally dismal 1980s there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth over the loss of the “grande cinema” that held sway in Italy from the end of the Second World War until 1975 or thereabouts. Beginning in the 1990s there was a sort of revival and there is again a cinema in Italy, if not an Italian cinema in the sense current until the 1970s. It is no longer a great cinema like that which existed in what now seem to be the good old times. Instead it is a good cinema for bad new times. If one imagines the old cinema as a well ordered garden with its showpiece auteurs and its solidly rooted genres, and the 1980s a period in which it had all gone to seed, with a couple of new auteurs like Nanni Moretti or Gianni Amelio popping up in different corners and very little genre activity other than soft-core porn, then the more recent period is one with a lot of new growth but little in the way of an overall pattern.

The present volume is a celebration of this new growth, with very little misplaced nostalgia for the good old days. This is as it should be, for the new cinema has grown up (to shift the metaphor slightly) on very unpropitious soil. Post-war Italy, for all its problems, was a basically transparent society. Left and right, modernisers and conservatives, differed as to the solutions to the problems facing the country, but they were in broad agreement as to what the problems were. Even more than neo-realism and certainly more than the auteur cinema of the 1970s and early 1970s, it was probably the *commedia all’italiana*—“comedy Italian style”—that defined the nation’s sense of itself. It was a genre sensitive to some at least of the nation’s ills (notably the survival, particularly in the South, of a sexual double standard) and, although it did not agonise over them, it was not excessively complacent and was even at times quite acerbic. But this basically gentle form of comedy could not survive the deep ideological crisis that overtook Italy from the late 1970s onwards—the opposing extremisms of far-left and far-right terrorism, the blurring of demarcations in the centre, and the spread of generalised *mafiosità* beyond the confines of the Mafia properly speaking. And of course the resistible rise of Berlusconi and the mediocracy. In the 1980s it was not just the

cinema that lost its points of orientation: it was the country as a whole. On the surface things continued to look much the same and the bedrock on which the society was founded was strangely unaffected. But in between there was a turmoil from which a few people profited but which left much of the population bewildered and at a loss.

The cinema which has emerged in Italy in the last ten or twenty years is not a national cinema in the classic sense of a cinema which holds up a mirror in which a nation can agree to recognise its own reflection. Such reflections are rarely truthful and in the case of Italy today any such reflection would be even less truthful than they usually are. It is not even national geographically, since one of the most welcome recent developments has been the emergence of cinemas which are avowedly local. These new cinemas (the plural is important) are quite disparate, recognising the differences of regional, class and sex/gender cultures and their frequent mutual incommunicability. They highlight the often hidden world of immigrants, both legal and illegal, the accentuated separation of public and private spheres, and the gap, often amounting to a chasm, between appearances and reality. Many of the films featured in this volume stand resolutely on the margins—and rightly so, since in the absence of an agreed centrality, the margins are more worthy to be focused on than the centre. In this work focused on the margins, the role of individual authors is of paramount importance. We are not talking here of “auteur” cinema in the traditional sense but of distinct and distinctly authorial voices crying from the wilderness and demanding to be heard. The success in 2008/9 of Paolo Sorrentino’s *Il divo* and Matteo Garrone’s *Gomorra* is perhaps a sign that Italian cinema is moving to regain the centrality it appeared to have lost. But centrality does not necessarily mean consensus. There is still a lot of work to be done on the margins, and in worlds about which there is not likely to be agreement for some time. Meanwhile, the story told in this volume should be read as the story of a new beginning.

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INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM HOPE

In the early part of the 21st century, Italian film directors continue to find their creativity beset by economic, bureaucratic and logistical problems that emerge at every point of a project's duration and which militate against its successful conclusion. There are difficulties originating from the financing and production of film projects, a situation exacerbated by factors such as recurrent cuts, notably in 2005 and 2009, to traditional sources of state arts funding such as the FUS (Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo), and the opaque selection criteria for the distribution of such funds.¹ Apart from the existence of a small number of independent film producers and distributors, Italian cinema is dominated by an influential duopoly—Rai/Rai Cinema/01 Distribution and its media rival Mediaset/Medusa—which accounts for the majority of Italy's film production and distribution. There are other, more insidious determinants that affect a film at the level of its content, factors traceable, for example, to the political and economic interests governing certain production companies. For example, Medusa Film is part of the Mediaset group, which is, in turn, an element of the Fininvest empire owned by the family of the entrepreneur and politician Silvio Berlusconi. Medusa produces large quotas of films such as Gabriele Muccino's *L'ultimo bacio/The Last Kiss* (2001) and Giuseppe Tornatore's *Baaria* (2009), many of which, after their theatrical release on the Medusa multiplex circuit, are aired on Mediaset's subscription-based television channels. Normally, such films are subsequently given a prime-time slot on a Mediaset terrestrial channel such as Canale 5 before taking their places as DVDs in the Medusa Home Entertainment catalogue. The implications of such vertically integrated strangleholds on the Italian film industry are discussed at greater length in the section "Institutional Power; Political Denunciation".

The introduction to this volume examines the work of different generations of directors for whom auteurism arguments are tenable—film-makers who express original artistic and thematic agendas in the context

of personal perspectives that evolve from film to film. The specificity of their artistic vision separates their work from more corporate, commercial film projects and, echoing the original notion of the word *auteur* in cinematic contexts, the individual creativity of these directors places their reputations on a par with those of novelists and playwrights. The introduction also traces the principal thematic strands and cinematic styles discernible in the work of other contemporary Italian film-makers. At a macro level, there is an exploration of questions such as the conscious privileging of emotion as the primary mode of engagement for viewers with films. Delineated analyses are also provided of the following issues: the emergence of new millennium antiheroes in Italian cinema, characters who have internalized the country's prevailing value systems; the metamorphosis of Italy's regions within the broader phenomenon of national transformation, and also the symbiotic rapport between Italy itself and new global realities; the divergence between the personal self-realization of female screen protagonists and their increasing alienation within professional contexts; the progressive fragmentation of the concept of subjectivity within screen fiction and the effacement of individual identity; the socio-economic determinants jeopardizing relations between adults and children; the obviation of personal and ideological aspiration after epochs of socio-political radicalism; the increasing power and unaccountability of institutional and politico-economic elites; the contrasting destinies of genres such as political cinema and that of film comedy; and the transition of high-profile actors towards directorial roles.

The acuity of Vito Zagarrio's distinction between Italian *cinema* as an industry, with its inadequate funding, production, promotion and distribution apparatuses, and individual Italian *films* that are sometimes characterized by outstanding screenplays, visual approaches and auteurist expression, continues to be evident.² A number of established auteurs still uphold the country's finest traditions of art cinema—instantiated by work such as *La masseria delle allodole/The Lark Farm* (2007), the Taviani brothers' visually poetic yet harrowing portrayal of the genocide of the Armenians in 1915 at the hands of the Turks. These films are complemented by the international success of emerging directors including Matteo Garrone, whose masterly use of *mise-en-scène* and real-life locations in the Mafia-run hinterlands of Naples in *Gomorra/Gomorrah* (2008), and by innovative, lesser-known work such as Pappi Corsicato's *Il seme della discordia/The Seed of Discord* (2008), a stylish retro-chic comedy that ingeniously dismantles traditional notions of Italian masculinity. While there is much innovation at the level of individual films, a systematic consideration of Italy's cinematic output during the

early stages of the new millennium reveals that any notion of an incipient golden age is indubitably premature. Arguably, the examples of quality cinema listed above are substantially outweighed by a proliferation of films that are the consequence of a process of homogenization during which projects coalesce around increasingly formulaic ingredients and components.

The Italian Mainstream; Identikit Films

Besides following the aforementioned trajectory mapped out for film productions financed by commercial empires such as that of Fininvest-Mediaset-Medusa, typical Italian mainstream films will normally be characterized by a modest budget to minimize the risk of financial losses. They will be launched—promotion budget permitting—as close as possible to holiday seasons such as Christmas to maximize box office takings,³ and these will mainly be domestic since the film is unlikely to interest major international distributors. The director may be an individual whose career began with radical, innovative projects before gravitating towards more anodyne, conservative work with a greater likelihood of attracting financial backing, products such as television movies and fiction. The film's screenplay will often be based on a contemporary novel, written in a distinctive “visual” style to facilitate its future cinematic exploitation—a startling example of art being shaped into a commodity even during its gestation period. In terms of genre, the film is likely to be a hybrid “comedy-drama”, being neither sufficiently amusing to be categorized as a comedy nor consistently dramatic—apart from its implausible concatenations of melodramatic plot devices.

The narrative may initially be framed within contemporary socio-economic issues such as youth unemployment in order to superimpose a gritty sense of topicality, before such macro-level questions are swiftly marginalized in favour of emotional interplay between the film's protagonists at a personal level. These characters will often be portrayed by a young, handsome, media-hyped Italian actor, and by an alluring, possibly foreign showgirl or well-connected actress notable for her television work. They will be supported in secondary roles by ambitious television presenters and personalities seeking to make an impact within the cinematic medium, while ex-reality show contestants may also have a suitably decorative function within the cast. The film's external *mise-en-scène* will be predicated on indexed, touristic depictions of Italy's urban and environmental landmarks, locations advocated by the country's many regional film commissions; the logistical input of these organizations

therefore ensures that the movie also doubles as a promotional vehicle for the region in question.⁴ The notion of the film as movie/advertisement will also be underpinned by a proliferation of product placement woven into the narrative, particularly of products originating from the same media group involved in financing the film. Its soundtrack will frequently feature full-length renditions of popular music by successful contemporary singers, these songs briefly constituting the film's dramatic pivot as the actors' emotions and gestures are harmonized with the song's lyrics and time signature. A film set in an earlier epoch will invariably use period pop music as an affective, nostalgic assault on the viewer's emotions.⁵

The film's visuals will usually be centred on the aesthetics of television fiction and soaps, featuring two-shots of protagonists together, and frequent close-up shot-reverse shots of their faces to engender the "emotional" involvement that viewers seek, a phenomenon that will be explored in the following section of this introduction via several concrete examples. It is an aesthetic approach that is typical of increasing numbers of young film-makers who have grown up, according to Maria Buratti, "starved of the language of cinema and nourished by the codes of television" with the consequence that "cinema tends to model itself on the characteristics of the small screen, and to lose its particular style, power and function".⁶ Carlo Tagliabue has also analysed the different career trajectories of contemporary directors, noting that very few possess diplomas from Rome's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, have served an apprenticeship with an established film-maker, or honed their skills via documentaries before attempting their first full-length feature film; instead, many of today's directors come from the worlds of theatre, advertising, academia, music videos, or television.⁷ This inevitably evokes the spectre of a generation of film-makers raised on, and influenced by, the televisual medium, directors whose artistic projects reconstellate the same visual and narrative formats for eventual mass consumption within the television schedules of the same media organizations that have aesthetically conditioned these film-makers since birth, and which now finance their cinematic work.

The Viewer's Emotional Stupefaction

Critics and artists such as Bertolt Brecht were scathing in their assessment of the tendency of spectators to succumb passively to emotion by empathizing with the destiny of fictional protagonists, maintaining that such affective responses reduced a spectator's ability to reason critically. However, through the use of a technique variously labelled as a

“distancing” or “defamiliarization” effect, the viewer’s emotional indulgence and absorption in a story could be disrupted, and a greater awareness of the artifice of the art form and its manipulative potential could be elicited.⁸ In cinematic terms, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierrot le Fou/Pierrot Goes Wild* (1965), with its stark genre transitions from the detective thriller to the musical, and its scenes in which characters look to camera and address viewers directly, instantiates this approach. Nevertheless, Mariagrazia Fanchi’s research regarding the modes of viewer engagement with contemporary Italian cinema, a study with the ultimate aim of identifying what cinemagoers seek in terms of film entertainment, is significant for the frequency with which the word “emozione” is used by her interviewees.⁹ This has become a mantra in Italian multimedia entertainment, being incorporated, for example, into the title of one of Mediaset’s pay-TV channels, Premium Cinema Emotion. This particular service primarily features comedies and romantic dramas, thereby enabling viewers to avoid the sense of “feeling uneasy and almost under examination”, an experience that one of Fanchi’s interviewees complained about after watching films that highlighted socio-economic issues.

The output of Giovanni Veronesi is a prime example of cinema providing the viewer with a series of crude narrative set-ups resulting in facile emotional payoffs. The unedifying *Che ne sarà di noi?/What Will Happen to Us?* (2004) recycles the narrative premise of Italian adolescents spending their summer holidays in Greece and coming of age, the film resorting to subjective voice-overs to externalize and clarify, if it were necessary, the characters’ anxieties. A further two films, tenuously linked to different notions of love, *Manuale d’amore/Manual of Love* (2005) and *Manuale d’amore 2* (2007), both with episodic structures and characterized by obtuse effects such as characters repeatedly enunciating their thoughts either through voice-over or direct to camera, also shamelessly deploy the most clichéd of music as an emotional amplifier. For instance, a superfluous soul ballad accompanies a scene of marital crisis which could have received a more nuanced articulation if simply left in the capable hands of the actors Sergio Rubini and Margherita Buy. Two new millennium biopics by Marco Risi also privilege emotion over intellect, an arguably justifiable approach in the case of *Maradona, la mano di Dio/Maradona, The Hand of God* (2007) the rags-to-riches story of a popular figure like the footballer Diego Maradona, but intrinsically problematic in *L’ultimo padrino/The Last Godfather* (2008) which relates the final months of the fugitive Mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano before capture. The narrative of the film, made for television rather than for a theatrical release, portrays the personal, private interstices between the

turbulent events in Provenzano's life that would comprise most orthodox socio-historical accounts of the period. In its focus on Provenzano the man, his deteriorating health and his allusive religious language which his henchmen interpret as authorizing murderous violence, the film effectively obfuscates the character's pivotal role within the repressive socio-economic network that he helped to perpetuate.

The ability to harness and maximize the talents of an ensemble cast has been interpreted as a key strength in the films of Michele Placido, an actor/director, and in the work of Ferzan Özpetek. Paolo D'Agostini discerns a "collective purpose" on the part of the actors in Placido's Mafia movie *Romanzo Criminale/Crime Novel* (2005), and goes as far as to confer auteur status on Placido himself on account of his putative prowess in directing the cast in the manner of an "orchestra conductor".¹⁰ Placido's thespian background undoubtedly helps to provide a showcase for intense actorly workouts within films such as *Ovunque sei/Wherever You Are* (2004), an existential drama focusing on a couple's passions and regrets, but this, the hallmark of a capable theatre director, does not necessarily translate to cinematic artistry, and Placido's films can easily be accused of resorting to emotional set pieces such as feral sex scenes and spiralling violence to compensate for their artistic shortcomings. Although his cinema has progressed from the self-indulgence of earlier films such as *Del perduto amore/Lost Love* (1998), with Placido in the leading role, there is little evidence to suggest his compatibility with traditional definitions of cinematic auteurs—individuals who articulate a discernible world-view in their work and around whom the techniques and meanings of a film find cohesion. In addition, the accusation sometimes aimed at auteurs, that their presence obscures an awareness of the creative input of other people in a film's development, could certainly not be levelled at Michele Placido.

After an auspicious debut film juxtaposing materialist Western lifestyles with those of a Turkish community in Istanbul—*Hamam/Hamam: The Turkish Bath* (1997)—a theme indirectly yet implausibly rearticulated in *Cuore sacro/Sacred Heart* (2005) as a ruthless female entrepreneur turns philanthropist after a tragic bereavement, the film output of Ferzan Özpetek has declined into the sort of melodramatic television-style fiction outlined earlier in this introduction. The important social issue of the legal rights of same sex couples in Italy was tentatively articulated in *Saturno contro/Saturn in Opposition* (2007) but was soon submerged and trivialized by the media hype surrounding the casting of Ambra Angiolini, an ex-children's television presenter and singer, and that of Luca Argentero, an ex-reality show contestant, in supporting roles. Although

boasting proficient ensemble casts and a plethora of emotional set pieces, aesthetically and technically there is little to differentiate *Saturno contro* and Ozpetek's subsequent offering, the family drama *Un giorno perfetto/A Perfect Day* (2008), from prime-time Italian television fiction, apart—perhaps—from a single, startling crane shot towards the end of *Saturno contro* that soars upwards and away from the character of Davide as he screams in despair after the death of his partner.

Auteurs in the New Millennium

Although characterized by an increasingly visceral emotional charge centred on eroticism and violence, the thematic continuity in the work of Giuseppe Tornatore, his creative control as writer, director and occasional editor of his films, his relative autonomy in terms of film production and ability to attract substantial project funding, together with an international reputation that is into its third decade, consolidate his credentials for auteur status. While his films induce powerful affective responses within the viewer, in their aftermath a more intellectual engagement is elicited regarding the socio-cultural legacy of the past and the way it overshadows the present and the lives of individuals who often experience a sense of personal loss.¹¹ The notion can be traced throughout his new millennium work, emerging in the epic generational saga *Baaria* (2009) and in *La sconosciuta/The Unknown Woman* (2006) with its epiphanic moments of horror as an Eastern European surrogate mother traces the infants that have been taken from her by child traffickers; the theme links these films with his international, Oscar-winning work, *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso/Cinema Paradiso* (1988). As noted by Mary Wood, rare breakthrough successes of this kind can take directors into a different league in terms of attracting large budgets, stellar casts and technicians, while still enabling them to explore the issues that underpin their *oeuvre*.¹² Wood also mentions the impact of this process on the output of Bernardo Bertolucci after the success of *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). Bertolucci's work also spans the millennia, although *I sognatori/The Dreamers* (2003), a refiguration of the student riots in Paris in 1968, is constructed through the optic of personal nostalgia and fantasy, and its many prurient, voyeuristic scenes performed by a young, unknown cast underline rather uncomfortably the abyssal status differential between them and an influential director like Bertolucci. The mercurial Roberto Benigni also benefited from an enhanced international profile after the Oscar success of *La vita è bella/Life is Beautiful* (1997). His reputation has consolidated that of Italian cinema, and parallels can be drawn between Benigni's film-making and that of

Fellini—notably the way in which his oneiric, magic realist visions of the world, often featuring his “muse” Nicoletta Braschi and regions of Italy with a personal affinity for him, are now being articulated through opulent, expensive productions. But the Holocaust theme of *La vita è bella*, which was preceded by films on issues including the Mafia and serial killers, and followed by projects such as *Pinocchio* (2002) and *La tigre e la neve/The Tiger and the Snow* (2005), a darker interpretation of a children’s classic and a meditation on the carnage during the American occupation of Iraq respectively, make for uneasy juxtapositions of tragedy and humour, confirming the suspicion that serious, complex issues continue to be inadequately explored, trivialized and funnelled into personalized comic vehicles for Benigni.

Together with the Taviani brothers, mentioned earlier, Ermanno Olmi shares the distinction of having established a career in quality art cinema spanning more than half a century. The temporal and geographical focus of Olmi’s new millennium work has been diverse, exemplified by *Il mestiere delle armi/The Profession of Arms* (2001), a meditation on war through the centuries but articulated within the context of the conflict between the Papal states and German forces in 1526. *Cantando dietro i paraventi/Singing Behind Screens* (2003), a more whimsical tale concerning Chinese piracy in the 18th century, nevertheless returns to the previous film’s theme by emphasizing the perennial sacrifices of the poor, whether conscripts or deck hands, to satisfy the acquisitional fervour of powerful political and economic elites. This notion is given a contemporary grounding in *Centochiodi/One Hundred Nails* (2007), a critique of abstract intellectualism that portrays a philosophy lecturer abandoning his career to live as a hermit, his presence acting as a catalyst for cohesion within a village community and galvanizing the inhabitants to resist the local authority’s intentions to bulldoze part of the area. Olmi’s masterly framing techniques in *Il mestiere delle armi*, ranging from the exquisite, painterly closed framings of nobles listening to chamber music to the expansive, extreme long shots—with considerable depth of field—of advancing German troops, images that dissolve into other perspectives of the military advance, underline the often neglected visual potential of cinema and they remain the gold standard of contemporary Italian film aesthetics.

Dario Argento’s cinema is an entirely different body of work, but it can also be categorized as auteurist since it constitutes a repository of innovative visual techniques that constantly push the aesthetic boundaries of film into new territory. Within this volume, Russ Hunter’s essay outlines the ways in which the film-maker’s output has oscillated between horror and suspense thrillers, and it also examines how the critical

reception of Argento's more recent work has been conditioned by the reputation of the director's early films. Marco Tullio Giordana is also into his fourth decade as a director renowned for the political commitment of his work and the way it analyses and re-elaborates different historical eras, exploring the evolving scissions within the Italian population as they oriented and positioned themselves socially and politically during periods of considerable ferment. During the first decade of the 21st century his films have ranged from *I cento passi/The Hundred Steps* (2000), a biopic of the anti-Mafia and communist activist Peppino Impastato who was murdered in Sicily in 1978, to *Sanguepazzo/Wild Blood* (2008) a stylistic hybrid that fuses documentary newsreel footage, neo-realist aesthetics and self-conscious techniques such as jump cuts to depict the careers of the actors Osvaldo Valenti and Luisa Fenda as they irretrievably compromised themselves with Italy's Fascist regime. Emanuele D'Onofrio's essay extends this volume's focus on Giordana's work to other films including *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti/Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (2005) and *La meglio gioventù/The Best of Youth* (2003).

New Authorial Voices

In the foreword to this volume, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith differentiates between the central position of cinematic auteurs during earlier eras of Italian cinema and the "authorial voices" that periodically make themselves heard from the margins of new millennium cinematic culture. Silvio Soldini and Carlo Mazzacurati are directors who rose to prominence in the 1990s, and a discernible authorial voice emerges in their films, which are often linked by the narrative mechanism of a journey through which the protagonists, who experience some degree of socio-economic alienation or marginalization from their social contexts, attain a greater degree of self-awareness and/or self-realization.¹³ Mazzacurati's 21st century films are visually evocative in their depictions of provincial life, frequently that of the Veneto region in north-east Italy, but are often severe in their evaluations of the narrow-minded values of the provinces where circumstances precipitate two non-conformist characters into each other's company—the petty criminals in *La lingua del santo/Holy Tongue* (2000) and in *A cavallo della tigre/Riding the Tiger* (2002), the ill-fated couple Giovanni and Maria in the period piece *L'amore ritrovato/An Italian Romance* (2004) and the young teacher Mara and Hassan, an immigrant, in *La giusta distanza/The Right Distance* (2007). The wistful nostalgia for former modes of existence that often permeates the mindsets of the outsiders portrayed by Mazzacurati contrasts with the emotional

highs and lows and slightly higher social strata of Soldini's protagonists. Soldini portrays a generation restless with its socio-economic and existential destiny, composed of individuals who invariably nurture a talent, passion, quirky ambition or cultural heritage that is incompatible with the exigencies of routine within the developed world's capitalist societies. In *Pane e tulipani/Bread and Tulips* (2000), Rosalba, a housewife, reactivates her passion for accordion music and for more rewarding social relations after befriending an Icelandic waiter in Venice. In *Brucio nel vento/Burning in the Wind* (2002), the Eastern European cultural identity and former life of Tobias, an alienated migrant worker in Switzerland, is articulated through sustained viewer alignment with the character and by folkloric musical refrains. The Almodòvar-influenced *Agata e la tempesta/Agata and the Storm* (2004) with its vibrant, polychromatic *mise-en-scène*, flawed but sensuous middle-aged female protagonist, choral cast to generate storylines of attraction and confusion between the sexes, Mediterranean ambience and arch, melodramatic plot twists, depicts characters such as Romeo with his idiosyncratic desire to possess a trout farm, while young Benedetto learns knife-throwing skills, a family tradition, from a grandfather he never knew he had. In the darker *Giorni e nuvole/Days and Clouds* (2007), which charts a bourgeois couple's descent into an inferno of poverty and unemployment, it is Elsa's passion for medieval art and fresco restoration that is depicted as the key to a future rapprochement with her husband Michele.

Among Italy's promising younger directors, Daniele Vicari has arguably emerged as a film-maker with markedly creative approaches to characterization, genre and aesthetics. In an intelligent reworking of the Western, *Velocità massima/Maximum Velocity* (2002) portrays the rapport between Stefano, a mechanic, and young Claudio whose technical skills and computer expertise give Stefano an advantage in the illegal high-speed nocturnal car races in which he participates, before they fall out over the same girl. In Vicari's words, *L'orizzonte degli eventi/The Horizon of Events* (2005) re-articulates the science fiction genre, partly because the protagonist, Max, is a researcher conducting experiments within a bunker inside a mountain in the Abruzzo region of eastern Italy, but mainly through the narrative mechanism of depositing him, via a car crash, into a seemingly extraterrestrial world, that of the Albanian shepherds who live a feudal existence in the same region.¹⁴ The film's opening sequence is a flashforward to its denouement, with viewers being pitched into the subjectivity of Bajram, a shepherd, who knifes a Albanian *mafioso* after the latter sets fire to Bajram's passport; a disorienting point-of view (POV) shot from the shepherd's perspective as he runs away in terror through the

bleak landscape immediately plunges the viewer into a parallel world with which no contact is normally made. By casting Valerio Mastandrea—rather than one of his peers such as Riccardo Scamarcio, who would unwittingly bring the unwanted baggage of his media heart-throb role with him—in both leading roles, an actor with an understated but broodingly powerful screen presence, Vicari is able to explore the ways in which 21st century masculinity is besieged and effectively eviscerated by socio-economic constraints that threaten to drive characters like Stefano out of business and which compel Max to falsify results for fear of losing research funding. It is a form of male characterization which other directors have also elaborated upon in their new millennium work.

New Age Antiheroes

In *L'orizzonte degli eventi*, viewers may balk at Max's manipulation of his lovers and his unquestioning internalization of capitalist notions of competition and efficiency at all costs, but, in Murray Smith's terms, spectators continue to be closely aligned with the character through POV structures and reaction shots, while the narrative focus falls squarely on his actions.¹⁵ This creates an interesting disjunction in the viewer's engagement with this and other new millennium films, since the process is a recurrent one in contemporary characterization. In his essay on Paolo Sorrentino in this volume, Alex Marlow-Mann traces the ways in which the director problematizes the viewer's attachment to Titta De Girolamo, the inscrutable Mafia emissary holed up in a Swiss hotel in *Le conseguenze dell'amore/The Consequences of Love* (2004) and the repugnant loan shark Geremia De Geremei in *L'amico di famiglia/The Family Friend* (2006). Emidio Greco's immaculate, glacial and calculating university professor, the protagonist of *L'uomo privato/The Private Man* (2007) is presented along similar lines, seemingly with consummate control over his career and personal relationships, but ultimately forced to take responsibility for his actions after discovering that he has been covertly filmed over a period of months. Mario Martone's *L'odore del sangue/The Scent of Blood* (2004), adapted from a novel by Goffredo Parise, is marked by the contrast between its stylized and often opulent external long shots—such as the early scene of a beach archipelago frequented by the middle-aged protagonist Carlo and his young lover, their entwined forms merging with the rocks on which they lie—and the narrowing of Carlo's mental horizons into lurid sexual obsession towards his wife's extra-marital affairs, prompting what Smith defines as “central imagining” within viewers who are given extensive subjective access to

Carlo's disturbing mental projections.¹⁶

Mimmo Calopresti is another director who has repeatedly presented disconcerting profiles of individuals floundering in the void of materialism at the heart of Italy's metropolises, without, however, outlining any form of antidote to this existential morass. *Preferisco il rumore del mare/I Prefer the Sound of the Sea* (2000) relates the experiences of a troubled youth from the southern region of Calabria who moves to Turin to continue his studies as a consequence of a businessman's conscience-easing intervention. *La felicità non costa niente/Happiness Costs Nothing* (2003), while initially portraying a middle-aged architect, Gianni (played by Calopresti), rebelling against the hypocrisy of bourgeois social and professional values as other characters comment on his idiosyncrasies, ultimately fails to raise itself above an exercise in middle-class navel-gazing predominantly set in luxurious apartments and villas. In *L'abbuffata/The Feast* (2007), a meditation on the attraction of cinema for the inhabitants of the Calabrian town of Diamante, Calopresti's narcissistic actor protagonist Francesco briefly takes centre stage during a sequence set in Rome before the narrative takes a whimsical turn as Gérard Depardieu, playing himself, arrives in Diamante to participate in a project by a local film troupe. Possibly the most chilling depiction of unequivocal, opportunistic male ambition in modern Italy emerges in Vincenzo Marra's *L'ora di punta/The Trial Begins* (2007) as a corrupt policeman turns property developer, wreaking emotional and economic havoc in his wake. However, there is a further strand to Marra's work, notably his stark and perceptive depictions of life in the Naples area. This reflects the enduring appeal of Italy's regions for contemporary directors, in particular the ways in which depictions of the cultural transformation of specific areas enable film-makers to draw attention, in a concrete, salient manner, to the often imperceptible socio-economic changes affecting the country as a whole.

Filming Italy's Regions

Although Italy's network of regional film commissions provides logistical assistance primarily to directors who hail from other areas of the peninsula, some of the most striking films from the first decade of the new millennium have been made by directors with an intimate knowledge of what are often their home regions. Vincenzo Marra's drama *Vento di terra/Land Wind* (2004) immediately pitches viewers into the alternative reality of the Neapolitan hinterland of Secondigliano, with a slow 360° camera pan taking in the encroaching tower blocks and the reverberations of amplified music emanating across housing estates; significantly though,

the narrative “portrays the events in the life of a socially marginalized individual without the slightest hint of rhetoric or melodrama”.¹⁷ This understated, aphoristic approach, a form of realism eschewing the emotional thrall within which other contemporary narratives are often mired, re-emerges in Marra’s documentary *L’udienza è aperta/The Session is Open* (2006). Its lingering interior shots highlight the dilapidated, underequipped buildings in which magistrates and judges of all political persuasions initiate Mafia trials, the film exploding, *en passant*, the media myth that they work to left-wing agendas. An atmosphere of Greek tragedy permeates Antonio Capuano’s portrait of a Neapolitan Mafia clan caged like animals in their security compound in *Luna rossa/Red Moon* (2001), where their paranoia escalates into incestuous sexuality, internecine violence and a climactic slaughter. Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario/Mario’s War* (2005) is a less stylized and more socially sensitive depiction of a liberal, middle-class foster mother’s naïve desire to bridge the gap between Naples’s marginalized underclasses and the city’s more privileged social strata, her attempted adoption of a disturbed boy from a slum quarter being thwarted at both a social and institutional level. A geographical attachment to the Naples area also spans Pappi Corsicato’s 20th and 21st century work, the latter being characterized by *Chimera* (2001) which uses peripheral localities including Pozzuoli and Giugliano as backdrops for a visually and musically sensuous comic melodrama examining the degree of sincerity in contemporary relationships.

The region of Apulia in south-east Italy has been innovatively depicted by directors such as Sergio Rubini and Edoardo Winspeare, although there is a stylistic demarcation between their techniques. The work of Rubini, an actor/director, is character driven and typified by a self-conscious, performative style that often lurches into the comic grotesque. *Tutto l’amore che c’è/All the Love There Is* (2000) revisits provincial Apulia in the 1970s to outline the impact of the arrival of a Milanese engineer and his three emancipated daughters upon a local community; *L’anima gemella/Soul Mate* (2002), a fable evoking the mysticism of folklore in which a jealous woman uses a spell to transform her physiognomy into that of her rival, is an ingenious meditation on appearance forms and the modern propensity to remodel one’s external features rather than confront one’s inner demons. Rubini’s visually arresting style in terms of camera movement is exemplified in a scene set in a quarry where Angelantonio (Rubini) invokes his mother’s reputed magic powers before the kneeling Teresa, the camera circling them before a crane shot surges upwards, transforming the image into an extreme, high-angle long shot, and implying that the powers of Angelantonio’s mother, who is in a nearby

church, have suddenly been harnessed. Rubini's reworking of Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamasov*, *La terra/Our Land* (2006), depicts the insidiousness of provincial life in drawing émigrés back into its seething passions and rivalries during their rare visits home, while *L'uomo nero/The Black Man* (2009), a semi-autobiographical period piece set in Apulia in the late 1960s and featuring local actor Riccardo Scamarcio, relates how a station master's artistic aspirations are met by local prejudice and snobbery. With regard to the function of landscapes in cinema, Sandro Bernardi conceives of them as having symbolic functions through which culture can be expressed; he links his research to branches of philosophy that focus not only on art's aesthetic function but on its anthropological significance and ability to elicit reflection on humanity's rapport with its surroundings.¹⁸ This notion recurs in the work of Edoardo Winspeare, notably in *Sangue vivo/Life Blood* (2000) with its tracking shots of arid olive groves and crumbling *trulli*—traditional conical huts—interspersed with images of the construction of opulent villas. This encapsulates the visual juxtapositions—often also found in Rubini's films—of a brash, modern materialism supplanting Apulia's local socio-economic and cultural traditions, a concept elaborated in the film's narrative when, during a social evening, the protagonist Pino and his band of traditional musicians are humiliatingly told to stop playing because the guests “want to dance to something else”.

A heartening number of films with a tangible regional setting also possess a clarity of vision and a socio-cultural sensitivity that enable them to transcend their geographical parameters and assume a macro-level relevance not only to Italy but to the developed world as a whole. Ettore Scola, another candidate for auteur status, is synonymous with Rome, and *Concorrenza sleale/Unfair Competition* (2001) enhances his reputation for capturing the minutiae of the capital's idiosyncratic inhabitants while contextualizing his characters' interpersonal relations in narratives with a powerful metaphorical resonance. *Concorrenza sleale* depicts a society characterized by local businesses ruthlessly undercutting each other's prices, an escalating tendency to scapegoat foreigners, media propaganda that deceptively implies societal prosperity, and the ease with which the public is beguiled by suave, high-profile political figures; in essence, a society whose critical spirit has been dulled by a depoliticized media predicated almost exclusively on sport and showbusiness. Although Scola's drama is set in Fascist Italy in 1938, its implications for the present are disturbingly evident. In both their film and television work, the directors Daniele Ciprì and Franco Maresco continue to highlight the institutional and social phenomena that have blighted the lives of

successive generations of Sicilians, while also taking a broader interest in cult elements of Sicilian, Italian and world cinematic culture. Their new millennium work such as *Il ritorno di Cagliostro/The Return of Cagliostro* (2003) concerning the doomed attempts of fictitious Sicilian film-makers to bring projects to fruition and *Come inguaiammo il cinema italiano/How We Got Italian Cinema Into Trouble* (2004), a portrait of the careers of the Sicilian comedians Franco Franchi and Ciccio Ingrassia, typifies their approach. In his essay on Ciprì and Maresco in this collection, Abele Longo contextualizes their recent work in the light of their most controversial film *Totò che visse due volte/Totò Who Lived Twice* (1998). The socio-cultural significance of Italy's north-west, in particular Turin and the Piedmont region, provides the narrative stimulus for many of the films of Davide Ferrario, ranging from the comic *Se devo essere sincera/If I Have to be Honest* (2004) to the incisive socio-cultural satire *Dopo mezzanotte/After Midnight* (2004) and the documentary *La strada di Levi/Primo Levi's Journey* (2006), a car journey that retraces the steps of the writer Primo Levi as he returned to Turin after his liberation from the Auschwitz concentration camp. Ferrario's work is also notable for its exploration of the life choices made by women from different social backgrounds and for its examination of the institutional and socio-economic obstacles complicating their quest for self-realization.

Women on Screen

A film such as Ferrario's *Guardami/Look at Me* (1999), from the imperative in its title that demands a gaze rather than acquiescing in a one-way process of objectification, articulates an outwardly more dominant femininity for the new millennium. This—in the narrative contexts of 21st century Italian cinema—is often achievable at a personal level, but the precarious nature of personal autonomy for Nina, the porn actress protagonist of *Guardami*, is all too apparent in her particular field of work. At times in the film, Ferrario creates an intriguing dialectic between the pleasure/power derived from self-exhibition and the exploitative dynamic that animates the porn industry. In one scene during which Nina's inhibited boyfriend ventures on to a film set to visit her, Nina is seen in medium close-up as she fellates another actor, yet her sight line is fixed authoritatively to camera, unblinkingly returning her boyfriend's gaze, reappropriating the emotional power generated by the sex act and redirecting it towards him. However, Nina's fragile hold over her professional existence is manifested as she is diagnosed with cancer and rapidly sidelined; one day, she briefly returns to the film studio to greet her

colleagues and notices an enlarged image of herself on the wall that effectively symbolizes her status as a passive commodity. A similar sense of professional frustration and personal solace characterizes the denouements of *Dopo mezzanotte* and *Se devo essere sincera*, as it is implied that Amanda and Adelaide, the films' respective protagonists, both derive fulfilment by manoeuvring themselves into the centre of a love triangle involving two different men with entirely different attributes.

In a different context, that of two visually outstanding new millennium films with southern Italian female protagonists, Roberta Torre's *Angela* (2002) and Emanuele Crialese's *Respiro/Grazia's Island* (2002), there continues to be a total disjunction between the social role ascribed to women and the nature of their personal desires. The rough handheld camera perspectives of Angela in the claustrophobic environs of the narrow streets of Palermo and in the enclosed spaces of her boutique which doubles as an outlet for the illegal drugs handled by her husband and his Mafia accomplices, both hint at the scale of female subservience in this socio-geographical context. Within the frame, Angela—and by implication her individual aspirations—is frequently obscured by elements of the *mise-en-scène* and by shadows, and when she begins an affair with her husband's associate Marino, she is effectively marginalized, living out her days in social isolation. On the island of Lampedusa, the protagonist of *Respiro*, Grazia, is also shackled by the local community's conservative values and by the economic drudgery of working in a fish canning factory. Visually, Crialese attains a perfect balance by focusing on Grazia's uninhibited sensuousness without objectifying the actress Valeria Golino; the director deploys stylized slow-motion shots of her diving into the sea, a close-up of her entangled like a mermaid in fishing nets, and he concludes the film with exquisite low-angle underwater views of Grazia, like a siren, luring the island community into the waves. *Respiro* and another of Crialese's key films, *Nuovomondo/The Golden Door* (2006), are discussed by Pauline Small in another of this volume's essays. Female protagonists frequently form the narrative pivot to Alex Infascelli's visually experimental work, ranging from the thrillers *Almost Blue* (2000) and *Il siero della vanità/The Vanity Serum* (2004) to the psychological horror of *H2Oodio/Hate 2 0* (2006). The female detectives in the first two films, Grazia and Lucia, represent an entirely different approach to policing compared with the old-style, bullish methods of their male colleagues; Grazia, an I.T. expert, has to contend with the patronizing sexism of the Bologna force as well as their technological illiteracy, as they unwittingly disconnect a murder victim's computer at a crime scene. Infascelli also delights in exploring the darker side of the female psyche,

through grotesque creations such as the television host Sonia Norton in *Il siero della vanità*, and what he describes as the uniquely bizarre antagonism that evolves between women, attitudinal perspectives that emerge in *H2Oodio* together with another principal theme in early 21st century Italian cinema, the blurring of notions of identity and of the boundaries between reality and fantasy.¹⁹

Split Subjectivities; Alternative Realities

The compelling opening sequence of Infascelli's adaptation of Carlo Lucarelli's novel *Almost Blue* depicts an area of grassland changing colour three times before focusing in extreme close-up on the iris of the eye of Simone, a key murder witness in the film, the iris being covered by a contact lens featuring a smiley face design. It emphasizes the way in which modern individuals become isolated within their own technological worlds, increasingly interfacing with computers to a point where, if their mode of personal interaction is not already impaired—as in the case of Simone and his blindness—then it becomes aberrant by personal obsession and estrangement from social norms. The image of the grass changing colour in Simone's mind's eye, and the motivation for the serial killings in the film, namely the murderer's desire to assume the physiognomies of the victims, lead to the perception that reality and identity are increasingly what the individual wishes them to be. It is a concept that Infascelli carries through to *Il siero della vanità* as a television entertainer, humiliated and deranged by the failure of an escapology trick on live TV—itself depicted as a cynical simulacrum of reality—kidnaps his fellow guests from that particular show in order to re-enact the stunt and attain personal redemption. Notions of identity are in constant flux in Infascelli's work, with viewer alignment switching between characters and even merging with the POV structures of murderers.

Marco Bellocchio, whose auteur credentials are as strong as those of the directors discussed in an earlier section, has a propensity to present films whose narratives are far from linear, their present reality being constantly encroached upon by institutional power structures stretching back across the ages, the narratives also splitting off into a myriad of future hypotheses in the imaginations of the films' characters. In his essay on Bellocchio, Marco Grosoli outlines how the film-maker protagonists of *L'ora di religione/The Religion Hour* (2002) and *Il regista dei matrimoni/The Wedding Director* (2006) experience bewildering encounters particularly when dealing with the ritualism of the Catholic Church, and these precipitate moments of distorted subjectivity—rendered in slow

motion or by dissonant montage—during which the protagonists temporarily experience a parallel reality superimposing itself upon everyday modernity. Bellocchio's films, instantiated by *Buongiorno notte/Good Morning Night* (2003) which portrays the kidnapping of the Italian politician Aldo Moro in 1978, elicit intense viewer alignment towards characters, and this sometimes continues into the films' denouements which, although filmed with a realist aesthetic, are mental simulations or projections from a protagonist's perspective. This is the case in the closing sequence of *Buongiorno notte* when Moro walks freely and serenely along a city street—an alternative, imaginary denouement contrasting with his tragic end. Asia Argento's *Ingannevole è il cuore più di ogni cosa/The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2004) also stages a mesmerizing fusion of subjectivities, including that of the young Jeremiah who is reunited with his natural mother Sarah (Argento), a drug addict who is given custody of him. The animation sequences used to articulate the child's moments of trauma are indicative of Argento's growing prowess as a director, and she is one of several Italian actors now establishing a name for themselves behind the camera.

Before/Behind the Camera

In their assessment of the factors drawing modern Italian cinemagoers towards particular kinds of Italian movies, Francesco Casetti and Severino Salvemini identify a nascent domestic star system principally fuelled by television fiction which facilitates the transition of actors into cinematic projects. The profiles of actors are enhanced by television exposure rather like those of their predecessors after the Second World War through their appearances in photo novels and other new media. Casetti and Salvemini assert that if a film is anchored to the name of a burgeoning star, this reduces the economic risks associated with the project, finance is easier to obtain, a minimum level of box office takings is guaranteed and commercial spin-offs from the film are likely to be more lucrative.²⁰ This same notion can be applied to the increasing numbers of high profile actors who have made their directorial debuts in the first decade of the 21st century, building on the work of the previous generation such as Sergio Rubini and Michele Placido, who in turn consolidated the tradition established by world famous actor/directors such as Vittorio De Sica. Alessandro Haber's dark comedy about mental illness, *Scacco pazzo/Crazy Mate* (2003), and Franco Neri's drama exploring an autistic child's rapport with a jazz musician, *Forever Blues* (2006), are examples of this phenomenon.