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With a Preface by Federico Vercellone

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COUNTER-CANONICAL AESTHETICS IN POSTCOLONIAL ITALIAN LITERATURE AND CINEMA

Pietro Deandrea
(University of Turin)

*I want the migrant to become a
'subject' in a multiple sense, to have a voice.
I don't want the migrant to remain only an empty image.*
John Akomfrah¹

Migrant literature and cinema in Italy are usually presented as debunking mainstream Italian discourse. A distinguished critic like Derek Duncan, for instance, praises Graziella Parati's *Migration Italy* (2005) as a groundbreaking work which argues 'for the power of migrant cultural production to offer counter-narratives to the negative representations of migrants that have been hegemonic'.²

This article discusses some aesthetic strategies employed by postcolonial writers and filmmakers in Italy to produce counter-narrations of our present times. It first focuses on *Momodou*, a short story by the Wu Ming writers' collective, showing how its formal features such as structure, multifocality and long historical perspective may embody some counter-canonical facets of postcolonial Italian literature. Moving to cinema, I argue that Ermanno Olmi's *Il villaggio di cartone* (2011) conceives a fluidity of spaces that goes against the segregational spatial arrangements typical of Italian (post)colonialism and its artistic expressions. The same fluidity is developed to its extreme in a very different film, Gabriele Del Grande, Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry and Antonio Augugliaro's *Io sto con la sposa* (2014).

-
- 1 Cristina Piccino, 'L'immagine migrante' [interview with John Akomfrah], *Alias – Il manifesto*, 8 January 2011, 3. All translations into English from works in Italian are mine.
 - 2 Derek Duncan, 'Italy's Postcolonial Cinema and Its Histories of Representation', *Italian Studies*, 63:2 (2008), 196.

At the same time, this movie brings to the fore a fluid mixture of languages, media and genres. The generic alternation between fiction and documentary in this film is then related to Daniele Gaglianone's *La mia classe* (2013), where these two dimensions clash and bring Gaglianone's filmmaking to a critical dilemma, a point of crisis.

Finally, I argue that this ambivalence between the fictional and the real, in *Io sto con la sposa* and *La mia classe*, is indicative of a coexistence between visionary artistry and an urgent need for an active engagement with the realities of postcolonial Italy. I show how this call to action is shared by *Il villaggio di cartone*, too, in spite of its highly symbolic cinematic language.

This article is concluded by observing how all the works analyzed here, including Wu Ming's *Momodou*, are characterized by counter-canonical aesthetics insofar as they depart from naturalism to enhance their readers/spectators' critical awareness. It is only at this point that I trace analogies between the literary work and the films here considered, because I deliberately approach these two media separately, each in its unique aesthetic specificities, without over-stretching my comparative analysis.

Sandra Ponzanesi rightly points at the danger of overlooking the aesthetic peculiarities of postcolonial Italian texts, besides their political value³ — in this article I attempt to keep her warning in mind. However, my formal analysis is also close to the role of Cultural Studies, described by Emanuele Monegato in its primary interest for power dynamics:

to develop a deeper comprehension of the ways in which symbolic and cultural processes are connected to political, economic and social power, without considering the centrality of notions such as canon and aesthetics, or considering them to arrive at their deconstruction.⁴

3 Sandra Ponzanesi, 'La "svolta" postcoloniale negli Studi italiani: Prospettive europee', in *L'Italia postcoloniale*, ed. by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Florence and Milan: Le Monnier Università and Mondadori Education, 2014), p. 57.

4 'sviluppare una comprensione più profonda delle modalità con cui i processi simbolici e culturali sono connessi al potere politico, economico e sociale non contemplando la centralità di nozioni come canone e estetica, se non per arrivare a una loro decostruzione'; Emanuele Monegato, 'Studi culturali

*We have an extremely different subjectivity
from the Italian mainstream.*
(Igiaba Scego)⁵

Thanks to its unique combination of polysemic ambivalence and political urgency, postcolonial Italian literature can offer, as Valentina Dogao writes, a new subaltern perspective.⁶ *Controcanone*, “counter-canon”, is the significant title of Monica Venturini’s monograph on colonial and postcolonial Italian writing.⁷

Critics have concentrated on its counter-canonical function from various angles. Giuliana Benvenuti emphasizes its role of counter-history capable of recovering the voice of those who have been made voiceless.⁸ In a similar vein, Gabriele Proglgio takes the Indian Subaltern Studies’ horizontal historiography to argue that writers such as Gabriella Ghermandi enforce practices of counter-narration, rewriting the past by having recourse to oral memories.⁹ Other critics focus precisely on the issue of genre. They give prominence to an aesthetic straddling between genres, codes and narrative perspectives as constitutive of a counter-canonical role.¹⁰

e letterari. (Nuove) frontiere ideologiche’, in *Introduzione ai Cultural Studies: UK, USA e paesi anglofoni*, ed. by Nicoletta Vallorani (Rome: Carocci, 2016), p. 67 (Monegato here references Stuart Hall’s *Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies*, 1992).

- 5 ‘Noi abbiamo una soggettività molto diversa rispetto al mainstream italiano’. Camilla Valletti, ‘Siamo tutti disgregati: L’italiano lingua di Petrarca e Celentano. Intervista a Igiaba Scego di Camilla Valletti’, *L’indice dei libri del mese*, January 2016, 10.
- 6 Valentina Dogao, ‘Ibridazioni postcoloniali e decostruzioni letterarie’, in *Subalternità italiane: Percorsi di ricerca tra letteratura e storia*, ed. by Valeria Deplano, Lorenzo Mari, Gabriele Proglgio (Ariccia (RM): Aracne, 2014), p. 45.
- 7 Monica Venturini, *Controcanone: Per una cartografia della scrittura coloniale e postcoloniale* (Rome: Aracne, 2010).
- 8 Giuliana Benvenuti, *Il romanzo neostorico italiano: Storia, memoria, narrazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2012), p. 7.
- 9 Gabriele Proglgio, ‘Subalternità e silenzi tra storia e letteratura: Modelli epistemologici e luoghi della contro-narrazione’, in *Subalternità italiane: Percorsi di ricerca tra letteratura e storia*, pp. 85–88.
- 10 See Giulia Molinarolo, ‘Per una nuova critica della letteratura italiana della migrazione: Questioni aperte’, *CoSMo: Comparative Studies in*

I consider Wu Ming's short story *Momodou* (2008) as embodying all these features.¹¹ Its narration goes backwards in time, through short chapters numbered from thirteen to zero. In Chapter 13 a newspaper article informs that Momodou, a raving mad immigrant, tried to rape an African woman in a flat and then stabbed a *carabiniere* whose colleague shot Momodou to death. Kati, an old acquaintance of Momodou's family from their childhood in Gambia, wonders at the article's imprecisions, such as omitting the fact that the assaulted woman is Momodou's sister Yama — could Momodou's cantankerous character have possibly worsened to the point of trying to rape his own sister? In Chapter 12 Yama wakes up in a friend's house, still confused after the previous day's tragedy. Chapter 11 moves to the previous day, reporting the policemen's interrogation of Yama for the writing of their report on the incident: through their paternalistic and arrogant attitude, they manage to make her declare that Momodou might have kept a knife with him on his bed. Still going backwards, the following chapters reconstruct the phases of the incident in Yama and Momodou's flat: vice-brigadier Tajani hopes no one will mar his reconstruction of the events; Yama is locked in the police car while Tajani and his younger colleague Ciaravolo modify the crime scene for their needs, so that Tajani cuts Ciaravolo's arm with a kitchen knife to stage Momodou's aggression; Ciaravolo panicking after Tajani has shot Momodou, who was lying harmless on his bed ('after all your abusing at niggers, now you've killed one');¹² kitchen-bound Yama hearing a gunshot, but prevented from entering Momodou's bedroom; Yama, worried sick for Momodou's worsening depression, calls an ambulance first, then *carabinieri*; moments before being called to the flat, Tajani and Ciaravolo chat in a bar, with the former giving vent to his hatred for immigrants, jews and communists;

Modernism, 8 (Spring 2016), 164 (here Molinarolo references Venturini's *Controcanone* and Matteo Aria's *Cercando nel vuoto*, 2007).

11 Wu Ming, *Momodou*, in *Anatra all'arancia meccanica: Racconti 2000–2010* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011 [2008]).

12 'a furia di imprecare contro i negri, ne hai accoppato uno'; Wu Ming, p. 288.

Yama's memories of Momodou's lively character before their move to Italy and his months of solitude as a factory worker in northern Italy ('Small worlds with their closed gates; anyway, in the factory you're a colleague, but outside you're just a nigger.')

¹³

At the end, Chapter 0 describes a scene from Momodou and Yama's carefree childhood, when he complained about other kids teasing him for his pelican-like double chin while Yama sisterly advised him 'then you must change the song';¹⁴ at this point, within the same chapter, the narration moves to Tajani's childhood, to his admiration for his grandfather's military past in Africa and the child's concomitant wish 'to become a hero'.¹⁵

The reasons why I consider this 30-page-long story emblematic of the counter-canonical orientation of postcolonial Italian literature are at once political and aesthetic. Structure-wise, its upside-down structure exemplifies the need to overturn the rigidly hegemonic discourse oppressing migrants in contemporary Italy, represented by media and policing institutions. The Wu Ming writers' collective, following Yama's piece of advice, attempt to 'change the song' in order to change our perspective on reality.¹⁶ Not by chance, this structural feature is compounded by a narratological one, given the story's many points of view:

13 'Piccoli mondi coi cancelli chiusi, e poi in fabbrica sei un collega, ma fuori sei solo un negro.'; Wu Ming, p. 297. Commenting on his film *The Nine Muses*, John Akomfrah noticed that solitude was the most frequently mentioned feeling expressed by migrants, in the archival material that he had sieved: 'This, too, is a universal condition, but in a migrant's life it becomes explicit: you are what you appear to be, your interior dimension is denied.'; Piccino, p. 3.

14 'allora devi cambiare la canzone'; Wu Ming, p. 299.

15 'diventare un eroe'; Wu Ming, p. 301. While trying to calm down his panicking colleague, he mentions this possibility of turning the tragedy to their advantage and thus become heroes; Ciaravolo's answer is 'I don't want to be a hero. I just want not to feel ashamed.' ('Non voglio essere un eroe. Voglio solo non dovermi vergognare.');

¹⁶ Wu Ming, p. 283.

16 One member of the collective, Wu Ming 1, declared in an interview that Momodou may be seen as a symbol of Italian subalterns, representing the voiceless who stand on the wrong side of history, the side which was made to succumb in the arena of public memory; Simone Brioni, 'Postcolonialismo, subalternità e *New Italian Epic*: Intervista con Wu Ming 1', in *Subalternità italiane: Percorsi di ricerca tra letteratura e*

the newspaper article, Kati, Yama, the *carabinieri*'s report and Tajani are only some of the narrative perspectives alternating in *Momodou*. This Genettian multiple focalization may be seen as indicative of postcolonial Italian literature's drive towards multiple identities, as noted by Rosanna Morace.¹⁷

Momodou ends with the description of how Tajani became imbued, as a child, with the nostalgic colonial heroism about Italy's military enterprise in Africa, which would implicitly lead to his racist attitudes and his instinctive shooting of a harmless, bed-ridden immigrant. Rather than with a narrative closure, then, the story is concluded by opening wide the issue of the displacement of the past which recurs so often in the scholarship on Italian colonialism.¹⁸ I particularly agree with Alessandro Triulzi when he sees contemporary postcolonial encounters as 'a direct boost for refreshing (and transgressing) the amnesiac and, to some extent, still "silenced" colonial narrative in our country [...] to denounce the return of old colonial practices of explicit violence to perceived Others.'¹⁹ This unearthing and denouncing function involves a pedagogical one, as Stuart Hall conceived of it: to tear the veil from racist theories which presents themselves as natural, in order to show them in their historical and social constructedness.²⁰

storia, p. 286. I take this declaration as a fictional equivalent to Benvenuti's concept of counter-history reported above.

17 See Molinarolo, p. 162 (here Molinarolo references Rosanna Morace, *Letteratura-mondo italiana*, 2012).

18 See, for instance, Alessandro Triulzi, 'Displacing the Colonial Event: Hybrid Memories of Postcolonial Italy', in *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, ed. by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), *passim*.

19 Alessandro Triulzi, 'Empowering Migrants' Voices and Agency in Postcolonial Italy', *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*, 10:1 (2016), 60–61. This is to be taken as a constitutive feature of postcolonialism, as Robert Young argues: 'In a sense postcolonialism has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies.' Robert Young, 'Postcolonial Remains', *New Literary History*, 34:1 (2012), 21; quoted in Sandra Ponzanesi, 'On the Waterfront. Truth and Fiction in Postcolonial Cinema from the South of Europe', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 18:2 (2016), 219.

20 Stuart Hall, 'Teaching Race', *Multiracial Education*, 9:1 (autumn 1980), 7–10.

If cinema is to be conceptualized as the cultural crucible of Italian national identity, it is legitimate to ask if its representations of the migrant subject rework and expand narratives of national belongings?
(Derek Duncan)²¹

*Do you believe that cinema can
bring about real change,
shift the way we look at things,
and change our perspectives?*
(Elena Korzhenevich)²²

I now wish to move from literature to the medium of film. As in the case of literature, my starting point is constituted by Ponzanesi's highlighting of its aesthetic facets: 'the term "postcolonial cinema" not only addresses the question of mobility and uprooting, but also wider issues of visual hegemony and aesthetic counter-discourses. [...] It also refers to a specific mode of viewing, filming and interpreting.'²³ Through the analysis of the films that I selected, I here identify two types of counter-discourse related to the use of space and to genre.

Spatial disruption is certainly one of the key elements in the story of Ermanno Olmi's *Il villaggio di cartone* (*The Cardboard Village*).²⁴ The film is completely set inside a church and its adjacent rectory. At the beginning the building (presumably deconsecrated) is emptied out of its objects by a group of workers, to the dismay and anguish of the old priest who remains to live there alone. The scene when the big crucifix is lowered down to be removed is emphasized by alternating a visual perspective from the top downwards and from the floor upwards; then the crucifix, tied to a rope, is made to rotate around itself while descending. Its

21 Duncan, p. 195.

22 Elena Korzhenevich, 'Changing the Narrative of the World: Interview with Gabriele Del Grande and Dagmawi Yimer', *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*, 10:1 (2016), 106.

23 Ponzanesi, 'On the Waterfront', p. 220.

24 Ermanno Olmi, *Il villaggio di cartone: Diabasis*, Cinemaudici, RAI Cinema, 2011.

descent also shows that some liquid is dripping from it: the viewer is likely to trace the connection with the incessant raining heard from the outside and with the sea images of shipwrecks showing from the priest's television set, inserted by the film's editing in between the removal scenes. This connection anticipates the arrival of a group of undocumented African migrants escaping the authorities (helicopters are another incessant noise in the background).

Little by little, the old priest devotes himself and his church to helping these people, who build a precarious cardboard village around the pews as a temporary shelter. By doing so, he also clarifies some of his old doctrinary doubts, being more and more convinced about the importance of good deeds over faith. In spite of the pressure and threats exercised by the authorities, he does not relent until the migrants find a transport to a preferred country of destination.

Olmi declaredly intended to create an extremely stylized story, that he calls 'an apologue'.²⁵ As a consequence, some of its characters are highly symbolic: the terrorist, the peaceful and educated leader, the ex-prostitute and the Italian doctor who survived a concentration camp are sometimes engaged in profound discussions about the meaning of existence. Given the unrealistic frame of the story, the resulting effect might risk mythologizing the subalterns, as Enrica Capussotti wrote in 2009 about some Italian films that failed, in her opinion, to give a convincing voice to migrant characters.²⁶

I will leave this issue open and turn to what I find most interesting for the scope of the present article — that is, the use of spaces. The ur-space of mainstream culture, home to that Christian religion so often trumpeted by far-right exponents as the epitome of Europe's most important values, undergoes a profound transformation. Olmi sees this as an inevitable consequence of a crisis of our contemporaneity, which is based

25 'Intervista a Ermanno Olmi', in *Il villaggio di cartone*, DVD extra.

26 Enrica Capussotti, 'Moveable Identities: Migration, Subjectivity and Cinema in Contemporary Italy', *Modern Italy*, 14:1 (2009), 65–66.

on ‘cardboard institutions, cardboard churches, cardboard people — a cardboard reality’,²⁷ that is to say a society without solid values supporting it. Pointing to a different idea of society based on the Christian value of unconditional charity, this space is thus changed not only to a cardboard shelter, but also through other symbolic reconfigurations: the stoup is turned into a rain collector under the leaking roof; the best room of the rectory, last used for the bishop’s visit, into a recovery shelter for a wounded migrant. After the initial high/low visual perspectives and now that Christ has symbolically descended from its heights, everything is reduced to ground level.

Although it may seem as excessively stylized and based on a paternalistic idea of charity, one should contextualize Olmi’s reconfigurations within the frame of the segregation of spaces that characterized Italian colonial cinema, often concerned with the elision and re-affirmation of racial and spatial boundaries between Italian colonizers and colonized subjects.²⁸

Another blatant disruption of postcolonial segregational boundaries is offered by Gabriele Del Grande, Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry and Antonio Augugliaro’s *Io sto con la sposa* (*On the Bride’s Side*, 2014).²⁹ The story of its creation has now reached a worldwide popularity: in the face of the thousands

27 ‘Intervista a Ermanno Olmi’.

28 Duncan, p. 197; Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, ‘Introduction: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Culture’, in Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds.), *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 3–7. As for postcolonial Italian literature destabilizing the architectural structure and signification of Italian cities, see Jennifer Burns, ‘Language and Its Alternatives in Italophone Migrant Writing’, in Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds.), *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 138. For the transformation of urban environments in migrant European cinema, see Yosefa Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 45–76.

29 Gabriele Del Grande, Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, Antonio Augugliaro, *Io sto con la sposa*, Gina Films and Doc Lab (plus 2617 crowdfunders), Italy–Palestine 2014 (www.iostoconlasposa.com).

of immigrants fleeing the Syrian war through sealed borders and dangerously smuggled into Italy, some friends decided to organize a fake wedding in order to take a group of Syrian and Palestinian–Syrian migrants to Sweden, their wished-for country of arrival. Who would ever dream of stopping and checking a wedding procession?³⁰ Between 14 and 18 November 2013, a mixed group of Italian and Middle Eastern wedding guests climbed through Ventimiglia’s smugglers’ old trekking path,³¹ then drove more than 3000 kilometres through Marseille, Nancy, Luxembourg, Bochum and Copenhagen, finally taking the train to Malmo, Sweden. This three-day trick worked, and was also filmed by a cinema crew accompanying the group. Then came the post-production phase, with its unexpected success through a crowdfunding campaign which became viral, all the way to the film being presented at top cinema festivals throughout the world.³²

The dialogues during their journey often touch upon the cruelties of the Syrian war and on the injustice of being trapped under the bombings without Western embassies offering help, the only alternative being to resort to smugglers and thus go through the fatal dangers of Mediterranean crossings.³³ While sharing

30 In a previous article on Italian new forms of slavery in anglophone literature and cinema, I identified the recurrent trope of the limbo — which signifies the paralyzing situation where many migrants find themselves — and a similar need to break out of it by transgressing the law; Pietro Deandrea, ‘New Slaveries in Italy: Anglophone Perspectives’, in *L’immagine dell’Italia nelle letterature angloamericane e postcoloniali*, ed. by Paolo Bertinetti (Turin: Trauben, 2014), pp. 78–81 (I here referenced Michael Winterbottom and Tony Grisoni’s *In This World*, 2002, and David Yates and Abi Morgan’s *Sex Traffic*, 2006).

31 The old Grimaldi superiore mountain path used to be crossed by clandestine Italian emigrants — yet another suggestion of how contemporary migrations can unearth similar (and not unrelated) phenomena from the past.

32 For further details on this incredible enterprise, see Gabriele Del Grande, *Storia di un matrimonio*, booklet accompanying the DVD of *Io sto con la sposa*, Real Cinema Feltrinelli, 2014, passim.

33 Del Grande, p. 17. Del Grande had spent some time as a reporter from the Syrian war front. Furthermore, he runs the blog *Fortress Europe*,

Olmi's utter disregard for the spatial boundaries imposed by the powers-that-be,³⁴ *Io sto con la sposa* is evidently a completely different film from many points of view. It narrates an actual (not simply artistic) spatial disruption resulting from an initiative of cultural activism, rather than from an artist's vision. In the light of this, and not least because of its inability to raise funds which led to the crowdfunding campaign, it could easily fall under the category of "guerrilla film-making" as theorized by Mariagiulia Grassilli:

A sort of film-making whereby the filming itself is an act of resistance and therefore laden with political meaning: images are produced which are not "recognized" by the cultural establishment which assigns resources and funds within the national territory. This is even more the case when the film-maker is a clandestine or "irregular" film-maker,³⁵ when his/her personal status as a citizen (let alone a film-maker) is not recognized.³⁶

Differently from Olmi's monolithically directorial creation and its dominant symbolic register, *Io sto con la sposa* mixes a great variety of languages, media and genres. Here lies the second counter-canonical aesthetics that I identify in postcolonial Italian cinema. *Io sto con la sposa* is composed of a mixture of Italian, Arabic and English, with a dominant presence of the Arabic of the migrants who occupy a central role in the story. Media-wise, it is also made of a mixture of dialogues, rap songs, wall writings and poetry readings.³⁷ Furthermore, its genre is

concerned with the victims of the various fronts of contemporary migrations (fortresseurope.blogspot.com).

34 Del Grande (p. 9) defines the final product as 'a new aesthetic of the frontier' ('una nuova estetica della frontiera').

35 In the case of *Io sto con la sposa*, it was some of the actors who were undocumented, and who constituted the main reason and the centre of this activist initiative.

36 Mariagiulia Grassilli, 'Migrant Cinema: Transnational and Guerrilla Practices of Film Production and Representation', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34:8 (November 2008), 1244–45.

37 *Io sto con la sposa* may be related to Hamid Naficy's theorization of exilic and diasporic filmmaking (2001) that he calls 'accented cinema': in

multi-layered: viewers are faced with a real action (travelling and arriving in Sweden) masked by a fiction (the fake wedding); in turn, this fiction is narrated through a documentary style which declaredly eschews a docu-fiction approach³⁸ while at the same time revealing its own fictional nature by repeated references (both visual and spoken) to the presence of the working crew filming the actors.

At the bottom of it all, this generic complexity results from an aesthetic achievement which is in tune with the directors' purpose, as Del Grande explains when he comments on the media's coverage of immigration issues:

Yet this media over-exposure does not move the debate one bit. On the contrary, it risks distorting the story. [...] Instead, we increasingly need more lengthy stories and more time to process the encounter with the human side of the story. And this function can be carried out only through cinema, literature, music, in other words, by art. And not only in the role of witness. [...] we need to dare to imagine a common future. And only art can help us in so visionary a task.³⁹

This visionary effort was capable, after all, of stripping the veil off the absurdities of our current immigration policies: Del Grande

summarizing its characteristics, Ponzanesi mentions 'questions of belonging and identity (travel and journeys, borders and confinement, a nostalgic longing for "home"), by language use (multilingualism, orality, acousticity, accents and inflections), modes of production (interstitial, collective forms of production, multi-source funding and co-production)'; Sandra Ponzanesi, 'The Non-Places of Migrant Cinema in Europe', *Third Text*, 26:6 (2012), 676.

38 Del Grande, p. 8. Elsewhere, Del Grande declared that *Io sto con la sposa* is 'not a classic documentary film [...]. This probably helps attract an audience who would hardly approach a documentary film'; Korzhenevich, pp. 109–10. For a discussion of docudrama in Michael Winterbottom's films, see Loshitzky, pp. 120–23. For an analysis of the genres of docudrama and mockumentary, see Sissy Helff, 'Scapes of Refuge in Multicultural Britain: Representing Refugees in Digital Docudrama and Mockumentary', in *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*, ed. by Lars Eckstein and others (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), passim.

39 Korzhenevich, p. 109.

wonders at the fact that not only was he never taken to court for his blatant infringement of the law, but the film was invited to be publicly screened for the members of Magistratura Democratica and the European Parliament!⁴⁰ In other words, this film demonstrates what Ermanno Olmi expressed through his symbols — the cardboard, evanescent foundations of our major institutions.

Before reflecting on the effects of this entangled co-existence of reality and fiction, I want to study another recent film based on an analogous generic complexity. From its very beginning, Daniele Gaglianone's *La mia classe* (*My Class*, 2013)⁴¹ works on a double level: the dimension of fiction, where a teacher of Italian works with a heterogeneous class of adult migrants in Rome,⁴² and the dimension of reality, thanks to which we are repeatedly shown the crew filming their lessons. This double level is extremely explicit from the very beginning, when each student cooperates with the crew for a sound check. The teacher, played by the popular Italian actor Valerio Mastandrea,⁴³ plays the double part of character/actor, so that we see him getting in and out of character (whenever he discusses the filming with the director, for example). The students, on the other hand, are the characters for whom these two levels tend to coincide: they are real migrants playing themselves, their real difficulties with the Italian language and with life in general (and this makes one wonder what amount of improvisation was allowed during the filming).

Much of the film is devoted to language classes where the topics at stake tend to focus on migrants' lives in Italy: for

40 Del Grande, p. 16.

41 Daniele Gaglianone, *La mia classe*, Axelotil Films, Kimerafilm, Relief and RAI Cinema, 2013.

42 *La mia classe* has been read as a contemporary version of Vittorio De Seta's masterpiece *Diario di un maestro* (*A teacher's diary*, 1973), which was centred on an inexperienced teacher and his class of underprivileged proletarian students in Rome's periphery; see Michele Marangi, 'Volti nuovi attraverso la cinepresa: Come la patria del neorealismo ha raccontato l'immigrazione recente', *L'indice dei libri del mese*, January 2014, 8.

43 His remarkable sense of humour often counterbalances the gravity of the narrated events.

instance, one lesson concentrates on terms and expressions related to job-seeking, with discussions and rehearsed phone calls.⁴⁴ Not differently from *Io sto con la sposa*, then, *La mia classe* is constructed quite sophisticatedly: in scenes like this we have a play within a play within a play.

However, it is real migrants who enact all this. From linguistic topics and expressions related to their lives, the film moves to personal stories narrated by each student separately: some of them are so traumatized about their past ordeals that find it hard to speak them out. These are very unstructured “interviews”, where the migrants are free to express themselves and the camera assumes the role of listener,⁴⁵ similarly to the listening attitude of cameras in *Io sto con la sposa*. Gaglianone’s “school” looks very similar to a real experimental school of Italian for migrants in Rome, called Asinitas. There, as Alessandro Triulzi describes it,

food and words would mix with the migrants’ wounds and bereavements. Their dreams and hopes of deliverance were acknowledged and shared, and the broken words of their narrations provided the first drive towards learning the Italian language, which was taught starting from their very memories and silence.⁴⁶

44 Obviously the lessons are not limited to these very practical topics. That would risk flattening these migrants to their state of need. There is also a long scene where the students listen to a long song about marginality, read and discuss its lyrics. The role of art to offer glimpses into beauty and complexity is something that Marco Carsetti deems essential for teaching to migrants; Marco Carsetti, ‘L’alfabeto per imparare a pensare’, *Gli asini: Educazione e intervento sociale*, III:11 (August–September 2012), 83.

45 See Alessandro Portelli’s method of oral history in Martina Martignoni, ‘Fuori dai confini dello spazio dello spazio della narrazione: Esperimenti di (in)visibilità’, in *Subaltermit  italiane: Percorsi di ricerca tra letteratura e storia*, p. 131.

46 ‘cibo e parole si mescolavano ai lutti e alle ferite dei migranti, i cui sogni e le cui speranze di riscatto venivano riconosciute e condivise e le parole spezzate delle loro narrazioni fornivano i primi stimoli di apprendimento della lingua italiana insegnata a partire dai loro stessi ricordi e silenzi.’ Alessandro Triulzi, ‘Volti nascosti, storie rimosse. Voci a contrasto dell’Italia postcoloniale’, in *L’Italia postcoloniale*, ed. by Cristina

In the film, it is worth repeating, all this is expressed through a swinging between the dimensions of reality and fiction. After one Egyptian student tells the teacher that his visa has expired, he is arrested in a public park for being undocumented; later, the same student is instructed by the director on how to act his suicide in a prison cell.

This character creates a stark contrast with another student, a sub-Saharan African called Issa. His visa, too, has expired, but we are shown a seeming irruption of reality into fiction — or, rather, an implosion of these two dimensions. Issa is very angry, and breaks into the school interrupting a lesson (and the filming of it), in spite of the crew's attempt to stop him.

When asked to go outside and talk about it calmly, he stubbornly states that he wants to remain in the classroom. Besides teacher and students, the classroom is now filled with the whole crew. A tense discussion starts between the director and the students. The director faces his own helplessness in this situation, torn between using it as a justification ('I am not a policeman') and feeling discouraged by it. The students implicitly accuse him of accepting the status quo even in the face of an unjust law: 'If tomorrow the same thing happens again to two of us, what will you do?', one of them asks him. Gaglianone's despondently replies 'I don't know'. Mastandrea, the actor playing the teacher, is equally pessimistic: 'And anyway, what we do is fucking useless.'⁴⁷ Is it worth to continue making this film, the protagonist and the director ask each other. In the end, a collective decision is taken to resume the shooting of the film, significantly starting with a dialogue about Issa, with the students saying that they are unaware of his whereabouts.

Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Florence and Milan: Le Monnier Università and Mondadori Education, 2014), p. 137.

47 'Io non è che sono la polizia'; 'Ma se succede che dopodomani che capita, e altri due ragazzi non possono fare più il film perché gli scadrà il permesso di soggiorno, che fai?'; 'Non lo so'; 'E comunque quello che facciamo non serve a un cazzo' (Gaglianone).

For the aims of a cultural studies analysis, the distinction between fiction and cinema of the real (...) can become an ancillary detail. What interests a cultural studies perspective is the way in which the text succeeds in placing at the centre of its representation the problematisation of the Other's reality, and in studying his point of view.
(Nicoletta Vallorani)⁴⁸

Cinema critics have often problematized the neat separation between documentary and fiction.⁴⁹ In the field of postcolonial cinema, Sandra Ponzanesi questions any attempt to compare their efficaciousness and comes to a conclusion similar to the one expressed by Vallorani's cultural studies angle in the above epigraph, while slightly shifting the focus on viewers:

The question of accountability moves from the epistemological towards the ethical. It is not whether these accounts, fictional or documentary, are 'more true' or 'more objective' in representing the migrant condition, but about how these cinematic representations *put in motion spectator and migrant subjectivities*.⁵⁰ (*emphasis mine*)

Constructed around a sophisticated interplay between fiction and reality, *Io sto con la sposa* and *La mia classe* make Vallorani's and Ponzanesi's claims even more significant. The most important effect of that interplay, in my view, is double faced. On one hand, their artistic sophistication expresses their effort to offer a visionary picture of a common future (albeit extremely uncertain, in the case of Gaglianone).

48 'Ai fini del lavoro culturalista, la distinzione tra cinema di finzione e cinema del reale [...] può diventare un dato accessorio. Quel che interessa, dal punto di vista dell'analisi culturalista, è il modo in cui il testo riesce a porre al centro della rappresentazione la problematizzazione della realtà dell'Altro e a investigarne il punto di vista.' Nicoletta Vallorani, 'Immagini in movimento: Narrazione, cinema, mimesi e cultura', in *Introduzione ai Cultural Studies: UK, USA e paesi anglofoni*, ed. by Nicoletta Vallorani (Rome: Carocci, 2016), p. 186.

49 Vallorani, p. 185.

50 Ponzanesi, 'On the Waterfront', p. 232; here Ponzanesi studies Andrea Segre's *A sud di Lampedusa* (2006) and Gerardo Olivares's *14 kilómetros* (2007).

At the same time, the solid presence of reality act as reminder of a deeply perceived need for ‘putting in motion’ more active, filterless forms of involvement with the real.⁵¹ The participants of *Io sto con la sposa* are constantly on the edge, given the risky task they are undertaking; the film’s opening credits explicitly announce an act of disobedience, while the closing credits dedicate the film to ‘our children [...] because at some time in their lives they’ll have to choose which side they’re on.’ Quite clearly, a need to act frames the movie. For their part, the crew members of *La mia classe* face an ethical dilemma concerned with a similar option of civil disobedience.

Olmi’s *Il villaggio di cartone*, too, in spite of its very different language, shares this call to praxis: not only is it centred on the priest’s disobedience to immigration laws, but Olmi also declared that charity implies a complicity with those who suffer. Accordingly he chose, as the subtitle to his movie, the word *diabasis*, meaning ‘word becoming action’.⁵² Quite curiously, a revered maestro of Italian cinema like Olmi, three activists and artists from Italy and Palestina (Del Grande, Al Nassiry and Augugliaro) and one of the most distinguished Italian arthouse film directors (Gaglianone), from their different ideological perspectives and in different degrees, share an engagement with reality — or a striving for it.⁵³

However, an earlier step should be taken into consideration, before active involvement is called into play. These complex entanglements of fiction and documentary, Olmi’s extremely

51 In his reflections on postcolonial Italian cinema, Michele Marangi traces this tendency towards the documentation of reality to Italian *neorealismo*. Moreover, he praises contemporary filmmakers for their ability to mix powerful metaphors and documentary purposes, similarly to what I argue here; Marangi, p. 8.

52 ‘Intervista a Ermanno Olmi’.

53 In 2008 Mariagiulia Grassilli lamented the gap between Italian filmmakers, who produced patronizing films, often ‘driven by a risky enthusiasm for the “Other”’, and a still emerging production of migrant filmmakers telling their own stories in their own accents (Grassilli, pp. 1248–49). My overall impression, as this article shows, is that this gap has narrowed in recent years.

stylized vision, and even Wu Ming's narration *à rebours* all represent ways of departing from an unproblematic mimesis of reality and from the forms of cathartic self-identification that this mimesis can generate. From a Brechtian perspective, we should consider them as helping viewers acquire a sort of critical distance about the topic in question⁵⁴ — that is, migrants' lives in today's Italy.

(I wish to dedicate this article to Claudio Gorlier, in memory of his curiosity, often counter-canonical)

54 Helff (p. 289) sees a similar function in the explicit constructedness of the mockumentary genre.

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