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CREATIVITY AND VISUALITY OF CLOSED SPACES: THE CASE OF ETTORE SCOLA

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Abstract. The article seeks to discuss a particular stylistic tendency, within audiovisuality, to contextualize narration and themes within closed (and often small) places – a tendency which has been given the name of claustrophilia. While particularly suitable to genres like horrors and thrillers, where the closed space often takes sinister and threatening connotations, claustrophilia may also appear in a more positive light, as a metaphor of shelter and safety, and has been in fact represented in all kind of ways.

Within this picture, and throughout all its history, Italian cinema has often shown a remarkable attention for claustrophiliac representations. As a consequence, the focus of the article will be the director Ettore Scola, a figure specialized in this approach, and particularly the case study of his 1977 release *A Special Day* (in Italian: *Una giornata particolare*), one of his most celebrated works, and a well-known one at international level, due also to its Academy Awards candidature and Golden Globe Awards win.

Keywords: *A Special Day*, audiovisuality, claustrophilia, Ettore Scola, fascism, homophobia, Italian cinema, M.A.P. model, sexism, visuality.

Introduction

Consulting a general dictionary (in this case, the Merriam-Webster, 2022), we find the term *claustrophilia* defined as the "abnormal desire for confinement in an enclosed space". The word, etymologically, comes from the Latin *claustrum*, "closed space", and the Greek φιλία, which is one of the four words designated for "love", namely "the highest form of love".

The presence of such nuances like "abnormal" and "highest" suggests an element of morbidity that may in principle be associated with certain, but not all, cultures. Put it trivially, in a place like Southern Italy, an insisted inclination to remain confined in one's own house or room may indeed be perceived as "abnormal", while a Nordic community may have a significantly different understanding of such inclination, and rather interpret it as "shelter from cold". Even in a more abstract sense (which is also a topic in the present essay), as in "being

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closed in oneself", factors such as population, density, interpersonal distance, proxemics, and others, may create cultural differentiations where silence, reservedness and introversion are perceived as either acceptable or uncomfortable, depending on the cases.

However, also at individual level, a closed space may evoke both positive and negative sensations. On the one hand, it may provide comfort and safety from the perils of the outside, a sense of warmth and shelter, a Freudian return to the maternal utero. On the other hand, it may create anguish, suffocation, anxiety – in other words, *claustrophobia*, certainly a more familiar word.

In audiovisuality, one may speak of claustrophilia in two ways: a diegetic one, when, that is, a love for closed spaces is represented *inside* the story, as – for example – the inclination/obsession of one or more characters (as in Joe Wright's recent *The Woman in the Window* (2021), where the main character is claustrophiliac due to a post-traumatic psychological condition[1]), and a non-diegetic one, when the authors choose to locate their story in a confined space, for whatever reason, including creative/artistic choices or limitations in the budget (the latter themselves often spurring creativity). In the latter case, the story may or may not depict (normal or pathological) conditions of claustrophilia, and in fact may also depict conditions of claustrophobia (*e.g.*, Rodrigo Cortés' *Buried* (2010)). The present article will focus mostly on the non-diegetic type, but – as we shall see – there will be instances of movies in which some of the characters display claustrophiliac tendencies, even if only in a symbolic sense. Also, the audiovisual medium investigated will be cinema, but I wish to make it clear that the analytical tools provided here are meant to be easily applicable to any audiovisual fictional text, provided due adjustments. My case study will be Italian cinema, and particularly the director Scola.

1. A M.A.P. for claustrophiliac cinema

Within the context of creativity studies, the article addresses three main problems:

- The relationship between creativity and space management, and particularly how the space itself becomes a creative source, due to some of its characteristics (*e.g.*, we will see how, in the chosen case-study, the employment of a "condominium" becomes a narrative opportunity to design a connection/communication of two closed spaces mediated by a surrogate of open space, embodied by a building's rooftop);
- The relationship between creativity of filmic visuality, particularly (but not only) in connection with the above-mentioned spatial elements. That means, following Greimas (1989), to discuss both the topological (position, orientation) and the plastic (eidetics, chromatics) dimensions of the image – something that reflects on both the photography and the direction of a film;
- Finally, a film director's creativity in terms of sheer authoriality. As mentioned already, the article will focus on the work of Scola and on his particular inclination to utilize closed spaces in his cinema, thus making them a privileged entry in his creative paradigm.

[1] From now on, in mentioning the various movies, I will have to assume that the readers are familiar with their plots, or anyway trust they will gather the necessary information. For evident limitations in space, I cannot engage here into plot synopses.

Methodologically, the article draws from a model I have been implementing in Martinelli (2020), and that I have named with the acronym *M.A.P.*, in reference to the idea of "mapping" audiovisual communication and giving a sense of direction to the various notions assembled. The initials stand for means, axes and properties. The basic premise is that we can understand audiovisuality through three main criteria:

1. *Means*: images, sounds and language – what we hear/listen to and what we see/read. The category of sounds includes any type of music, the noises that are audible in the text and the so-called soundscape. The category of images includes anything that is visible – characters, objects, landscapes, abstract representations, *etc.* The category of language is situated in the middle, as it has both an audible component (spoken words) and a visible one (written text). As the article's title specifies, the main focus within this category will be the visual tools of claustrophiliac cinema, not however disregarding the other two;
2. *Axes*: time and space. They ideally represent the vertical and horizontal dimensions of an audiovisual text – roughly overlapping, in both form and contents, with the semiotic concept of syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis (as already known since Saussure, 2016). The axis of time mostly coincides with the elements of narration, which is indeed an action extended in time units, horizontally, while the axis of space mainly overlaps with the equally crucial concept of montage, which, albeit more metaphorically, is an action that regulates the space of the text in a vertical manner. Additional concepts, such as that of diegetic and non-diegetic space, foreshadowing and sideshadowing devices and others are also part of this category. In this sense, it is quite important not to confuse this notion of "space" with the physical idea of "closed space" that is central in this article. Space and time, in the extent here defined, are both relevant to my analysis here;
3. *Properties* refer to the way audiovisual texts can operate to convey meanings. Within any communication act senders and readers take "roles" that may also vary depending on the circumstances (*e.g.*, a teacher and a student may keep teacher-student roles in a classroom but then switch into a friend-friend dynamic if they socialize in a bar). In this case, "properties" is the name we give to the possible roles played by the text itself. In Martinelli (2020), I have identified five main properties:
   – Taxonomy, the various typologies of text that can be created in relation to the media involved (*e.g.*, a fiction meant for television as distinguished from one meant for cinema), format (*e.g.*, a newscast as distinguished from a talk-show) and genre (*e.g.*, an action-thriller as distinguished from a costume drama);
   – Culture, the entire social, ideological, moral, political and indeed cultural choices that characterize the contents of a text;
   – Thematicity, the way objects, places, characters, and else, are identified as "topics", that is, elements with a thematic value;
   – Performance, the way contents are delivered: acting, directing, editing, *etc.*;
   – Technology, any property connected to the media and the devices by which the text is created and delivered: black and white, color, 2D computer graphics, 3D computer graphics, effects, resolution, *etc.*

It is also important to note that properties are not classifiable in any objective sense, but they are simply "anything that an author deems fit to employ in a given text". That is, they are conscious, or sometimes unconscious, designations that any creative force within an audiovisual text selects and applies in order to make that text operate at artistic and communicative level. To make one example, we do not *quantify* performance: it is a combination of factors and criteria, and for the most part is activated individually by the specific artist. Similarly, thematic and cultural properties are virtually endless, technological and taxonomic properties, too, are counted by the hundred, although they are constantly updated and upgraded.

When an artist creates and actualizes a text, they can use pretty much anything available. Reality of course, but also an alternative or imaginary idea of it, a past, present or (likely or not) future condition, or just emotions, opinions, mental processes, creative acts. Whichever is the mean, whatever axis it is operating on, it is very likely that each act is developed in stages. Some may be taken for granted, some may result in being less relevant than others, and some may also be unconscious in the artist's mind. Nevertheless, they are all visible, exactly like an ordinary act of communication. Keeping in mind what is communicated (as we said: a portion of reality, an emotion, an imaginary future, *etc.*), or in other words the actual "signified" (in Ferdinand de Saussure's terms) or "object" (in Charles Sanders Peirce's terms), audiovisuality is usually constructed according to the following steps:

a. *Definition*. What is represented and communicated must first of all be recognized as such, and not confused with something else, and then it must also be characterized, given some specific features. This process is called *definition* and it is divided into recognition (assignation of basic features) and characterization (assignation of complex features). When we characterize, in other words, we also need to take more specific actions, to define more complex characteristics. In this article, a special prominence will evidently be devoted to definition and characterization of closed spaces and qualities/feelings/values associated to them;
b. *Architecture*. Constructing a message and creating a correspondence between signifiers and signifieds is not just a question of defining the message as such, but it is also a question of contextualizing it, and putting it into relation with the surrounding environment. The placing of an item, the nature of its context, the balance among the various items, between background and foreground, *etc.*: there are tons of additional information that one can detect (and therefore create, within an audiovisual text), that the stage of definition is not actually so effective at conveying, comparatively. Relationships, for instance: the relation between two persons or objects is more easily constructed within the category of "architecture", rather than within "definition". Evidently, this is another central aspect in an essay interested in the filmic role played by a physical context like an enclosed space;
c. *Authoriality*. In conclusion, there are also manners of connecting signifiers and signifieds that are not conventional in a general sense, but that are instead typical of some authors' creativity. They are like signatures of the artist, and we need to know a little bit about them in order to grasp these signs in their entirety. "Authoriality" is thus a set of traits/features/architectural elements that do not follow the general rules of anthropological or cultural conventions, but rather reveal the personality and the choices of

the creators of that particular text. The authoriality of Scola will be of course featured prominently in the present article.

An effective creative audiovisual communication – to conclude – can only occur when all these criteria play a more or less relevant part. The expression *mise en scène* refers to the sum of all the features/elements that a production team places before a camera and within a frame, in order to have a successful representation of what the team has in mind in terms of contents, aesthetics, mood, and so forth. Before *mise en scène* there is the whole process of creating, writing, preparing, and after that there is also post-production, which is normally the process where more things are added particularly in the areas of montage, technologies, sound, *etc.* When we combine before, during and after of the making of an audiovisual text we have what we see, what we hear, what is spoken, and what is written (the "M" criterion); we have time and space (the "A"); and we have all the elements pertaining to taxonomy, culture, thematicity, performance and technology (the "P").

Concluding, it is not my intention to apply the model pedantically, throughout the text, pointing out specific correspondences, single analytical items, and so forth. Unlike Martinelli (2020) from which the model is borrowed, the goal of this article is not pedagogical, so in the following pages the text will flow organically, without following any particular template.

2. Filmic archetypes

When contextualizing claustrophilia within the various filmic cultures and practices, we firstly need to point out that cinema, as an art form, was actually born in connection with theatrical practices and experience, and in that sense was a claustrophiliac affair in a sort of "genetic" sense. Some of the early films shot by pioneers of cinema like Georges Méliès were claustrophiliac in principle, with their studio-recreated scenographies, their "missing fourth walls", and so forth.

In a second stage of film history, closed spaces were often a technological necessity, due to the still imperfect devices and facilities for filming, lighting, sound recording, *etc.* Basically, the kind of difficulties that were so hilariously portrayed in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952, directors Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen). The big studios were important in this respect as well, and it is ironic that all the quintessential "open space" big productions of the studios era between the two wars (*e.g.*, the *Tarzan* (book series) saga, the epic Westerns, thrilling adventure movies, peplums, *etc.*) were all shot inside four walls.

On the other hand, retaining an intrinsic theatrical dimension has been in years also an explicit creative choice. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) was born as an attempt to stage a filmic story in a distinct theatrical fashion (not to mention that the movie was an adaptation from Patrick Hamilton's play of the same name). But one could mention several other works, from Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Sleuth* (1972) to Robert Moore's *Murder by Death* (1976), up to cases like Mario Mattoli's *Neapolitan Turk* (1953, in Italian: *Un turco napoletano*), which ends with all the actors breaking the fourth wall and bowing to the audience from what is revealed to be an actual theatrical stage, or Lars von Trier's one of a kind *Dogville* (2003), with its imaginary walls and streets drawn on the ground that achieve the remarkable effect of conveying an even more oppressive sensation than in normal conditions.

Additional historical reasons for shooting a claustrophiliac film are of course economic. Works counting on a limited budget evidently tend to spare on as many elements as possible: locations is certainly an important one, and it is no coincidence that, when recognizing and defining that "small is beautiful" aesthetics of underground and independent cinema, small, closed spaces are among the most recurrent qualities. Eminent examples like Béla Tarr's *Almanac of Fall* (1984, in Hungarian: *Öszi almanach*), Vincenzo Natali's *Cube* (1997), Chris Kentis' and Laura Lau's *Silent House* (2011) and several others come to mind.

Most importantly, however, the main reason that keeps claustrophiliac cinema alive and kicking in pretty much every filmic culture and school is of archetypical type. The first archetype is intrinsically related to any storytelling-based form of creativity, having to do with genre patterns and conventions. These are archetypical in that, when put together, in a "the more the better" mode, they create a stylistic consistence in the text, making a given genre recognizable at a first glimpse, by just watching few frames. Among the most relevant conventions, we find certain types of character/characterization (*e.g.*, the detective in a crime film, a clumsy character in comedies, *etc.*); certain objects, stereotypes and contexts (*e.g.*, six-shooters and ten-gallon hats in Westerns, killing instruments and locked doors in horror films, *etc.*); certain ways of representing contents and subjects (*e.g.*, chase sequences or fights in action movies, the "falling in love" stage in romances, *etc.*); certain techniques and tricks (*e.g.*, extreme close-ups in Westerns, high-resolution filming in science fiction, *etc.*); certain musical strategies (*e.g.*, eerie music for horror, upbeat for comedy, *etc.*); and – fatally – certain spatiotemporal settings. More than one genre displays a predilection for particular spaces: wide prairies for Westerns, outer space for science fiction's, courtrooms for legal dramas, *etc.* When it comes to our topic, it is not a coincidence that, in the introductory paragraph, I have mentioned two movies like *The Woman in the Window* and *Buried*. Before becoming a thematic property of its own, indeed, the "closed space" is often a stylistic expedient employed to create tension and fear, thereby stressing on those morbid connotations we mentioned at the beginning, and pending on the *claustrophobic*, rather than *claustrophiliac*, side of the spectrum, at least from the audience's point of view. Crime movies, thrillers and horrors are indeed favorite genre destinations for closed spaces, especially when the latter are all but reassuring places (sinister castles, abandoned houses, cellars, *etc.*, up to, indeed, the ultimate restriction of the coffin in *Buried*). On the other hand, a rather literal acceptation of the word *claustrophilia* (where that *philia* takes a more sexual connotation) is found in genres like erotica and pornography, where closed spaces are again more recurrent than other locations – I guess there is no need to explain why.

Another archetype is also intrinsically related to storytelling practices, and is of narrative type. The closed, confined space is a classic "semiotic engine" for narrations of different sorts, especially – but not only – of the meta-diegetic type (*i.e.*, stories within the story). We see that typically in literary works like Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (2003, originally published in 1620) or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (2003, originally published in 1400), where a group of people reunite for whatever reason (an epidemic in the mentioned examples, but it can also be a party, a reunion, a casual encounter, or any other type of meeting). Not by chance, numerous claustrophiliac movies are of the choral type, featuring different protagonists of equal narrative importance, each carrying their own story; *e.g.*, we see that happening in

François Ozon's *8 Women* (2002, in French: *8 femmes*), Roman Polanski's *Carnage* (2011), Marco Ferreri's *The Grande Bouffe* (1973, in Italian: *La grande abbuffata*), and so forth, up to the specialist of the category, our focus Scola, who staged this archetype in numerous works: *The Dinner* (1998, in Italian: *La cena*), *The Family* (1987, in Italian: *La famiglia*), *A Special Day* and others.

Finally, we have a more general psychological archetype: the closed space as shelter, bubble, island, utero, golden or not-so-golden cage, and protective space in general – whether or not this idea is conveyed with positive (comforting, cozy, *etc.*) or negative (oedipal, obsessive, *etc.*) connotations. In principle, one could say that this psychological component is present in all claustrophiliac movies, to a higher or lower degree, but surely some movies place a particular emphasis on these themes – Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962, in Spanish: *El ángel exterminador*), Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), the already-mentioned *The Woman in the Window*, *etc.*

Within all three archetypical dynamics, the relation inside–outside is especially relevant. The closed space does not exist on its own, but also in competition to an open space displaying opposite characteristics, for the better and for the worse, and that, in the course of the story, attempts or succeeds to modify the inside. In horrors and thrillers, the threatening inside may be counterbalanced by a rescuing outside; in *Decameron*-esque models, instead, the inside represents the safety, while the outside is pestered with a deadly epidemic. Often, the interaction/conflict between the two spaces is embodied by specific characters – in different possible combinations: people coming from the outside who break the equilibrium of the insiders; outsiders who experience a personal change once they access the inside; insiders who "unlock" a given condition only when they manage to access the outside, and so on.

3. Claustrophilia in Italian cinema

Italian cinema has gained international prominence and influence at numerous stages of film history. At its very early stage, the state-of-the-art opportunities offered by studios like *Cinecittà* in Roma, Italy or *Dora Riparia* in Turin, Italy and the innovative directing skills of the likes of Giovanni Pastrone and Mario Caserini were responsible for the world's first proper film industry. During the 1940's, the impact of neorealism was felt by countless authors all over the world, and few years later the same occurred with genres like *commedia all'italiana* and Spaghetti Western, and most of all with the big *autori* like Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Pier Paolo Pasolini and others. More recently, the initially-underrated school of low-budget B movie authors like Mario Bava, Lucio Fulci, Ruggero Deodato and others (not to mention that Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns had been incredibly considered "B movies" for a period) became suddenly influential and "hip", thanks to the likes of Quentin Tarantino, Eli Roth or Robert Rodriguez.

Within all this picture, claustrophiliac movies have been a constant throughout all the genres and nearly all the authors (*e.g.*, Visconti's *Conversation Piece* (1974, in Italian: *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno*) for the *autori*, Carlo Verdone's *Compagni di scuola* (1988) for *commedia all'italiana*, Deodato's *The House of the Edge of the Park* (1980, in Italian: *La casa sperduta nel parco* for B movies, *etc.*), and therefore it is at least surprising that no specific

academic literature has been produced by film scholars, if not for single chapters/essays within more general treatises on Italian cinema. Of these few, even less are those who explicitly employ the expression *claustrophilia*: Sesti (1994) and Zagarrio (1998) are possibly the most notable cases, although they both refer to a limited period within Italian film history (the late 20th century, when admittedly claustrophiliac cinema reaches a peak in the peninsula). At the same time, it is quite significant that, in referring to the stylistic phenomenon, Millicent Marcus does not engage into a usage of the term, but indeed acknowledges Sesti with its coinage, in exclusive reference to that specific phase of Italian cinema (Marcus, 2020, p. 118). All this even though the expression has been used quite naturally by some of the world's most important film scholars (*e.g.*, Deleuze, 1986, p. 165). With so much uncultivated land, thus, my ambition here is to attempt some early analytical steps, hopefully opening one or two doors for further, more systematic studies. I shall do so by focusing on the director Scola and the most celebrated of his several claustrophiliac movies: *A Special Day*.

4. The case of Ettore Scola

Due to the limitations of this essay, I shall not engage into an extensive biographic introduction to Scola. There are excellent studies available, through which the reader can learn about his life, his cinema and also his impact on Italian society. Notable examples include de Santi and Vittori (1987), Brunet (2012), Moscati (2017), and Lanzoni and Bowen (2020).

Well known to most film lovers, the Trevico-born director owed his fame and reputation to his numerous ventures into *commedia all'italiana* (*Will Our Heroes Be Able to Find Their Friend Who Has Mysteriously Disappeared in Africa?*, in Italian: *Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l'amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?*, director Scola, 1968; *Down and Dirty*, in Italian: *Brutti, sporchi e cattivi*, director Scola, 1976; *The Pizza Triangle*, in Italian: *Dramma della gelosia (tutti i particolari in cronica)*, director Scola, 1970) and into that particular political-introspective, private-meets-public sub-genre of which he became an undisputed master, from the 1970s onwards (*We All Loved Each Other So Much*, in Italian: *C'eravamo tanto amati*, director Scola, 1974; *A Special Day*; *La terrazza*, director Scola, 1980). Common denominator, throughout his career, has always been his bittersweet approach to storytelling, and his emphasis on characters and dialogues (by no coincidence, he was often involved in writing both subject and screenplay of his movies). It may be attributed to the latter characteristics the fact that Scola opted repeatedly for single and closed locations, becoming arguably the foremost representative of claustrophiliac Italian cinema. Due also to its success and the accolades received (including a Golden Globe Awards win and a Academy Awards nomination, plus numerous awards in Europe), *A Special Day* stands out as a particularly successful attempt to conjugate the author's creativity with the more general questions of filmic visuality and management of closed spaces. This reason, plus of course the remarkable cultural and political value of the film's themes (which, as we shall see, addresses issues like fascism and antifascism, sexism/patriarchalism and homophobia), have made the movie subject to scholarly attention as well, with such notable examples like Kezich and Levantesi (2003) and Bruni and D'Angelo (2008).

A Special Day recounts of the day (May 6, 1938) of Adolf Hitler's historical visit to Roma. While most Roman citizens join the event, Antonietta (Sophia Loren), despite being a great fan of the *Duce*, stays home, as the subordinate "good housewife" that she is, to take care of the housework while her husband and children go to witness the parade. She is convinced to have remained the only person in the whole condominium, but when her mynah pet escapes from its cage and flies to the opposite window of the building, she discovers that a neighbor named Gabriele (Marcello Mastroianni) has not joined the event either. The two develop an unusual relationship, as Gabriele is revealed as antifascist and gay, two unconceivable characteristics for the traditionalist Antonietta. In fact – even though she does not know that – Gabriele, right before the two meet, was contemplating suicide: he is expecting the police to arrest him, later in the day, and send him in exile in Sardinia (where the fascist regime was sending dissidents and "perverted" of all sorts). Among other things, Gabriele had also been fired from his job as radio speaker, in favor of the more "solemn and virile" voice of Guido Notari (a real character – the official voice of the fascist newsreels).

The film finishes when the parade is over: Antonietta melancholically resumes her usual life, after her own "special day" had created a once-in-a-lifetime bubble inside her repetitive and subordinate existence. From her window, she sees Gabriele being taken away by the guards: his bubble, too, has burst. This is a recurrent theme in Scola's movies, not only the claustrophiliac ones: no matter how intense and eventful a "bubble" may be, it never has the power to affect the course of life, and it simply resolves to burst at the very moment when life itself imposes a closure. Days turn to nights, public parades finish, restaurants close (as in *The Dinner*), parties end (as in *La terrazza*), and so forth: no bubble can compete with that.

5. *A Special Day*

A Special Day, as mentioned, is located in a condominium, but more specifically it is a condominium of the EUR district, Rome, an area that was built during Benito Mussolini's times and was meant as a distinct expression of fascist architecture and modernism. All the events occur inside the two protagonists' apartments and on the roof of the building – an "open space" of sorts, which will indeed serve the purpose of "liberating" the two characters, even though for just few minutes. It is emblematic that, as a matter of fact, it is not only Antonietta's symbol of repression (her family) that joins the parade: it is also Gabriele's own symbol – the speaker Notari, who had taken his place on the radio – who goes there and "leaves him home", so to speak. Notari's voice is indeed heard in several spots throughout the film, as he comments Hitler's visit.

The big condominium is symbolic of a space of solitude and marginalization (Antonietta is marginalized as woman, Gabriele as an antifascist homosexual), but we soon understand that this condition is not inherent to the two characters, but rather imposed by a society that, besides being fascist, is also sexist and homophobic (and intolerant in general). For the two protagonists, the condominium ceases to be a cage of loneliness when everybody else empties the place to head to Hitler's parade: suddenly, Antonietta and Gabriele find themselves in a special place, fantastic and fragile, where the roof turns into a playground and the apartments turn into places of truth and revelation of their condition. Suddenly, the traditionalist and fascist Antonietta finds a soulmate in an antifascist homosexual. There cannot be "love"

between the two, of course, even though Antonietta makes an attempt to "convert" Gabriele and the couple do make love ("it was nice, but nothing has changed" – Gabriele comments afterwards), but more than that, as mentioned, it is life itself that will not allow any continuation to this relationship, however Platonic the two may accept it to be. The woman's house is a cage in which she is a more or less voluntary prisoner: she is a housewife, her place is at home – so she was indoctrinated. At home, it is the husband who "wears the trousers" (as that old sexist expression goes), and there is no place for her needs and aspirations. Partly for ignorance (Antonietta is shown to be illiterate) and partly for the impossibility to fight a socio-cultural *status quo* (the patriarchal-fascist society) that is far more powerful than she will ever be, she has an ambivalent relationship with her cage: she is both suffocated and protected. This is well emphasized by her maniacal paranoia to close all the windows, as an attempt to protect herself from the outside world (Zagarrio, 1998, p. 129): the house is the only place she knows, where she feels safe.

Gabriele, on the other hand, lives alone, but he is also a forced prisoner, due to his leftist ideology and sexual orientation, both extremely unwelcome in fascist times. It is the society of the time that determines the situation in which both characters live, but there is a difference: Antonietta has never experienced another life, while Gabriele has. He had had a career as radio host, but as Mussolini came to power, his not-enough-virile voice was deemed unsuitable to fascist standards, as we have seen.

5.1. Visuality and themes

Obviously, the bird's escape is the actual catalyst of the events, and a very emblematic one. Not only does the pet fly straight to Gabriele's window, showing the way in a concrete sense and also hinting an element of destiny in the story: its example serves an existential purpose as well. It shows that it is possible to break free, and that outside the cage there is a world of hope and revelations. For this reason, the key-sequence of the film is the time the two protagonists spend on the building's roof. That sequence is first a playful one (Antonietta and Gabriele play "catch me if you can" among the white laundry hanging on the threads), and then an intense moment of truth: she kisses him and he tells her that he is gay. Scola uses several visual devices to underline the feelings expressed: the roof is visibly illuminated by the sun (while the morning had started more gloomily), and the white laundry represents the innocence and the sincerity displayed at this point.

The timespan of *A Special Day*, as we have seen, covers one single day, from morning to evening: that corresponds exactly to the bubble of freedom and self-awareness conceded to Antonietta, from the moment her family leaves to when they all come back. Averagely speaking, thus, the length of the story is quite limited, as usually a movie will narratively cover several days – when not months or years. Yet, as seen already, Scola engaged into even shorter timespans, *The Dinner* being an example of real-time fabula and syuzhet correspondence.

Also, while other characters do appear (Antonietta's family, the doorwoman), the film is very much a star duet between Loren and Mastroianni, in a similar fashion as – years later – Scola's *What Time Is It?* (1989, in Italian: *Che ora è?*) will feature the same Mastroianni plus Massimo Troisi. All considered, thus, the film is an intentionally minimalist affair, where the units of time, space and characters are all reduced to a relative, or even bare, minimum: two

characters, one condominium and one day. This, too, may be read in a political sense, as the whole story develops in circumstantial opposition with an event that quintessentially embodies *grandeur*: Hitler's visit, with all sorts of honors and celebrations, in front of a crowd of thousands, and taking place in the most monumental and spacious spots in Roma, including the imperial fora, where the actual parade took place.

Elaborating further on the visual aspects, the choice of the condominium (besides the obvious narrative demand to introduce two closed spaces that may engage in communication without accessing the outside) may have two additional symbolic functions. Firstly, the condominium, thanks also to the massive and severe fascist architecture, reminds a bit of a penitentiary building[2]. In it, we have two "cells", Antonietta's and Gabriele's apartments, which are both located on the inner side of the condominium, their windows thus facing the courtyard and not the street. The two prisoners of these cells manage to meet and socialize, sharing a moment of freedom and hope, excellently embodied by the time spent on the roof, which is a *sui generis* "outside" space: it is in the open air, yet still *in* the building – the exact equivalent of the courtyard hour in penitentiaries.

Just like inmates, moreover, the two protagonists try to entertain themselves with those few activities that their condition allows: Gabriele has his books and, even more to the point (think about inmates hanging magazine pictures of pinup models), Antonietta has her collection of photos, cutouts and blurbs of Mussolini. Particularly significant of her status of servant-woman is the fact that probably she would have liked to join the parade more than anybody else in the family, due to her infatuation for the *Duce*, but, no, she is the housewife, she has to stay home, and even has to endure her husband's comment when he comes back: "you have no idea what you missed!" – almost as if it was her fault and her choice to stay home (but then, of course, that very comment has its own sarcastic turn-up: she may have missed Hitler's parade, but, boy, what did *he* miss!)[3].

The second function, I believe, is that of giving an accurate measure of the little but significant spatial extension – that is, personal progress – experienced by Antonietta and Gabriele. Meaningfully, such progress does not reach the extents that we would probably expect from a Hollywood blockbuster – from the apartment-cell to total freedom, open spaces, Grand Canyon and the likes. Rather, it is a small achievement, as small as a one-day bubble: from a lifetime in the apartment-cell to few hours among staircases, each other's cell and of course the roof. It is to Scola's credit that the audience perceive how that little achievement actually means the world to both of them, especially Antonietta, the woman and the illiterate.

[2] The location was Palazzo Federici, a condominium built in 1931 by the rationalist architect Mario De Renzi, one of the major exponents of fascist architecture and urbanism.

[3] It should not be surprising to learn that the character of Emanuele, Antonietta's husband, is depicted as vulgar, arrogant and aggressive: not incidentally, the primary quality that Antonietta notices, and is impressed by, in Gabriele is his kindness. More importantly, in the context of what this footnote is about, Emanuele, Antonietta's husband, is also not particularly clever. In his ideal of "family boss" who takes all the liberties that husbands used to take in those days (including verbally abusing his wife and frequenting prostitutes), he is shown as not really aware of anything that is going on in his house. Not only will he have no clue that Antonietta, Antonietta's husband, had this brief affair with Gabriele: he also does not notice that his own kids display all sorts of violations of the rigid home rules of the typical fascist household. One is shown smoking in the bathroom, another masturbates, another secretly applies make up. On top of everything, in the sequence where Emanuele, Antonietta's husband, does some morning exercise, we also learn that he is not fully capable of counting from 1 to 20 (he skips at least a couple of numbers in the process).

Conclusions: beyond the bubble?

Significantly, it will be exactly these two conditions (woman and illiterate) that Antonietta will quietly rebel against, maybe only for one night (the movie does not show more than that), or maybe in the future as well, through a path of increasing awareness. We see this in the last minutes of the movie: at the husband's invitation to join him in bed and perform "wife's duties"[4], she does not oblige immediately (we see her going to bed later, and we do not see or hear the husband – we may assume that he has fallen asleep) and instead she stays up to read a book that Gabriele gave her: a copy of *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, one of the countless literary works banned by the fascist regime. While not able to share her heterosexual affection, Gabriele still manages to give Antonietta a great gift: the seed of doubt about fascism and patriarchism. The sequence when she reads the beginning of Dumas' novel is particularly touching: she reads aloud (like people not too comfortable with reading usually do) and with difficulty, and we clearly have a sense that she does not understand some of the words of that incipit – such as *Huguenots* or *La Rochelle*, which she pronounces the Italian way (*La ro-k-elle*). Yet, we see clearly that she is making an effort and we get the impression that she will persevere also in the future. One must add, Loren's demure and understated acting in this sequence, as well as in the whole movie, is one of the peaks of her extraordinary career.

Antonietta, in return, has *de facto* brought Gabriele back to life: on the verge of committing suicide, he indeed recovers a bit of *joie de vivre* thanks exactly to this very unusual encounter. Antonietta gives her an opportunity to unburden himself of the secret of his sexual orientation – something, we understand, he had never dared doing before, and not without reasons. In an intense sequence of the film, Gabriele shouts loud his diversity in the building's staircase, knowing that nobody is there, but also performing a gesture that he must have dreamed of for a long time. Moreover, Antonietta's love, even though not reciprocated erotically, still has an impact on him: it gives him a moment of real care and affection, and some hope too.

He will still be arrested and deported in Sardinia, but we see him accepting his unfair destiny with dignity and without becoming that tragical figure he was planning to: Antonietta's love, and, in a sense, her "carry on despite everything" pragmatic approach prove to be an inspiration for Gabriele.

Inside the bubble, both characters briefly access each other's worlds, with their emotions and frustrations, finding out that their common denominator (being discriminated and marginalized) reveals many more similarities than their apparently-opposite profiles would suggest (most illuminating is the conversation they have after Gabriele confesses his homosexuality to Antonietta: after he explains his condition, she starts talking about her own, and her first words are in Italian: *Pure io tante volte mi sento umiliata e considerata meno di zero* – "I also feel often humiliated and considered less than zero"). Their encounter is a short relief, but also a possible new beginning. Sure, the bubble bursts and they return

[4] The request is particularly significant, in the historical context. The husband explicitly refers to his intention to generate another child and to call him Adolfo (Italian for Adolf, of course), but more importantly this would be the family's seventh child – an achievement that, in those days, fascist Italy would reward with a medal. By procrastinating to sleep with him, Antonietta is thus symbolically making an antifascist statement.

to their respective miseries, but we get the sense that something has changed for the better inside both. Conversely, when we compare that to our historical awareness of those years, we do not know what to make of this sensation: the story takes place in 1938, and that means seven more years of fascism, with World War II behind the corner. At least two of Antonietta's sons look old enough to be eligible for military recruitment in a few years from then: we therefore do not know if a family tragedy awaits Antonietta. Same goes for Gabriele: we know that the homosexuals sent to exile were subject to mistreatments, physical and psychological abuse and that many of them either died or ended up in mental institutes. We do not know if Gabriele will be among them.

Ultimately, thus, the bubble was mainly created for us – the audience: despite being very specifically contextualized in space and in time, up to a precise day and address (Palazzo Federici is a known building, located in Viale XXI Aprile, Rome), *A Special Day* is in fact a universal tale, in which two marginalized figures find reciprocal shelter and understanding during a short but intense moment of freedom, hope and self-awareness, against a whole life of repression. To say it with the Pink Floyd, it is an encounter of "two lost souls, swimming in a fish bowl, year after year".

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