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Nanni Moretti as Filmmaker and Character

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Abstract

This research stems from an interest in exploring the ambivalence about political commitment expressed in the films of Nanni Moretti, a theme that cuts across almost the entirety of the filmmaker's oeuvre. But this issue prompts larger theoretical questions: how do we know exactly what Moretti's stance is, if it is expressed through films which for the most part tell fictional stories? How are we to treat the relationship between the filmmaker's

opinions, expressed in his capacity as a public figure, and those the fictional characters in his films articulate? What to make of the autobiographical echoes in the films, and of the fact that the director performs under his own name in some of them? At a more abstract level: should art criticism take into consideration information about the artist? What kind of evidence about the circumstances (both historical and personal) in which an artwork was made is relevant to its appreciation and interpretation? Part One of the dissertation engages these questions, in an attempt at finding a theoretically firm footing in debates about authorship, authorial intention, and biographical criticism, which I then apply to a detailed investigation of Moretti's films, in Part Two. The concepts of the "biographical legend," "paratext," and "hypothetical intentionalism" (in contrast to "actual intentionalism") play a central role in my study, as do those of "art cinema" (as a mode of narration), and Brechtianism. In an attempt to combine the macro and the micro, a fine-grained analysis of what happens in the films is integrated in an account of the historical and aesthetic frameworks in which the films were made.

The thesis seeks to demonstrate that contextual information about the director – including concerning his life and his intentions – casts an indispensable light on Moretti's films, but this is not the same thing as imagining a transparent link between what is depicted in the films and the filmmaker's actual life. Self-representation is filtered through Moretti's particular use of irony, his consistent engagement with paradox, and his Brechtian effort to convey his characters (particularly the protagonists of his films) as riven by internal contradiction. Moreover, while Moretti does abide by some principles of realism – including "objective realism", in the art cinema tradition – the notion that his fictional films attempt to mirror reality in any direct sense would be wrong. In conclusion, while Moretti's films do have something to say of political import, they do this in a complex manner, which avowedly comprise paradoxical aspects. We can illuminate these features only by looking closely at the films and appraising them against the relevant historical and intellectual frameworks.

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AUTOPSYCHOGRAPHY

The poet is a faker
Who's so good at his act
He even fakes the pain
Of pain he feels in fact.

And those who read his words
Will feel in his writing
Neither of the pains he has
But just the one they're missing.

And so around its track
This thing called the heart winds,
A little clockwork train
To entertain our minds.

Fernando Pessoa (translated by Richard Zenith).
A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems. New York: Penguin, 2006 [1932].

Introduction

This dissertation stems from a desire to understand Moretti's films against their historical context. It stems also from the impression that, while these films have something to say about political commitment, this has all too often been translated into a series of epigrams that have been rendered hackneyed and lifeless by overuse. Moretti created quite a few one-liners in his oeuvre – perhaps most famously: "Words are important! He who speaks badly thinks badly, and lives badly!" – but this critique of the cliché has itself been turned into a cliché of sorts. Moretti's phrases have been treated like common-sense maxims that do not do justice to their subtleties, their intricacies, and their self-contradictory aspects, of which we can get a better sense only if we look closely at how they operate in the films. My premise is therefore not only that Moretti's work has something to say of political import, but also that it does so in a complex manner.

At an early stage, this project was (provisionally) titled "The ambivalence of political commitment". The concept of ambivalence, with its Freudian echoes, seemed an apt one as it hints at contradictory impulses, a tension between opposite feelings towards an object, a paradox that can be worked through but never simply resolved. Because the question of political engagement is not one Moretti settles once and for all, but is rather a theme that crops up again and again in various forms, it is important to look at it across the oeuvre. While I have eventually applied that original idea for a title to chapter 5 – which centrally deals with *Palombella rossa* (1989) – Moretti's ambivalent stance towards politics manifests itself in many other films, both those that overtly address political subject matters and those that don't explicitly do so.

The title also didn't feel appropriate for the overall project because it risked giving the false impression that politics is the only, or the most important – the *really* serious – theme Moretti's films address, an idea his work repeatedly makes fun of. I also did not want to imply the thesis would primarily be a discussion of Moretti's political ideas, as if these had

incidentally taken the form of film. This project focuses on Moretti as a filmmaker, on his films *as films*; it is not an exercise in political philosophy as such.

The most important reason why the provisional title ended up feeling inadequate, however, is that the matter of the political stance prompts another question, one that is both larger and logically prior to it: how do we know this is Moretti's stance, if it is expressed through films which for the most part tell imaginary tales? Characters' views cannot directly be attributed to authors. Perhaps the fact that Moretti performs in the films, embodying fictional people that carry autobiographical echoes (some of the characters visibly share some of the features of the actor-director), might be tricking us into falsely assuming these are the director's actual views? Indeed, how are we to treat the relationship between Moretti's opinions, expressed in his capacity of a public figure, and those the fictional characters in his films articulate? Can anything at all be said about Moretti's political stance by looking at the films – or should we limit ourselves to consider those things Moretti has said in real life, as the nonfictional Nanni Moretti? If so, what are we to do of the vast, and largely avowed, autobiographical echoes the films carry? What to make of the fact that in some of these films the director goes so far as to perform under his own name? Must we also ignore the fact that, in interviews, Moretti often says things that closely resemble the ones the characters in the films say, strongly hinting that the opinions voiced by the fictional characters – particularly those he personally embodies – are to a significant extent his own? And, at a more abstract level: should art interpretation take into consideration information about the artist, or ignore it? If one admits such information to be pertinent, what are the limits? What kinds of information matter to the interpretation of artworks, and which ones do not?

Over the last several decades, in academic circles at least, the interest in the author outside the text has become mostly seen as a temptation to be avoided. Criticism of the author – of her opinions and her biography – as a pertinent angle for the interpretation of literature and art took in the 20th

century two main forms, which are squarely addressed in chapter 1: in Anglo-American criticism, the influence exerted by the work of the so-called New Critics, and in Continental Europe the views that follow from the works of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. In different ways, both strands dismiss our preoccupation with the opinions, views, and biography of the author outside the text as naïve, and as a distraction from the serious business of literary (and art) criticism.

The task chapter 1 performs within my dissertation is primarily a negative one, that is, of testing the solidity of my initial assumptions. While some of the problems William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley raise with regards to the kinds of evidence that are pertinent to interpretation are still with us – and they emerge again in my discussion of authorial intention in chapter 2 – in practice I don't apply in my analysis of Moretti's films many lessons from these anti-authorial views. However, to discard the anti-authorist position is but a preliminary step, since all of the above questions about how to think of the relationship between the figure on the screen, within a fictional story, and the actual artist remain unanswered. In chapter 2, therefore, I look at the work of theorists who indeed have tackled the challenge raised by the biographical echoes in the text, who consider the extent to which what we know about an author should be allowed to colour our understanding of what happens in the artworks.

For Boris Tomaševskij, the author does matter for literary interpretation, but this figure is not coextensive with the actual human being, encompassing only those aspects of the author which intersect with the text – that is, only those aspects to which the text alludes to, explicitly or implicitly. Rather than the biographical author, for Tomaševskij it is the author's "biographical legend" that matters. David Bordwell elaborates further from this premise, in a series of studies on individual filmmakers which qualify in much detail the way we should go about reconstructing the authorial figure. Bordwell puts a particular emphasis on articulating the filmmaker's identity with the historical circumstances in which the artworks were produced. History appears in Bordwell's studies not just as some vague backdrop, but as

a set of constraints and possibilities against which the filmmaker makes her artistic decisions, including her stylistic choices: his monographs of individual directors are framed against the project of a "historical poetics". Besides his customary sharpness and detail in the analysis of films, Bordwell shows it is possible to conduct a thorough investigation of the work of an individual filmmaker without sacrificing an understanding of the wider panorama. This desire to combine the macro and the micro – an understanding of the historical framework with a fine-grained analysis of the films – is central to what (in my limited ways) I attempt to do with respect to Moretti's films in the second part of the thesis.

One puzzling aspect about the concept of the "biographical legend", however, is its legendary nature: how are we to determine what is the author's legend, if this is not supposed to match the filmmaker's real biography? If the identity that is relevant to the appreciation of artworks is – exclusively – that of its public persona, is this something that can be objectively ascertained? If we were interested in the biographical author, we would at least know where to look for it; but if we are only interested in the legend, where does it reside? On the other hand, if we allow our appreciation of an artwork to be inflected by the features of the actual human being, does this imply that every feature of the person may be relevant for art interpretation? Will this lead us to make claims about the author's ultimate nature – about who she *really* is? Is art interpretation a variation on mind reading?

This question emerges in chapter 2 (and is then examined in some detail in chapter 3, mostly by reference to the contested case of Woody Allen). In chapter 2, I discuss the ideas of "hypothetical intentionalists" like William E. Tolhurst or Jerrold Levinson, who insist that our goal should be to track the meaning of artworks as autonomous objects ("utterance meaning"), and not as it putatively resides in the mind of the artists who created them ("*utterer's* meaning"). But if my goal is not to disclose the artists' motives in making artworks, does that imply that I am free to discard their views and substitute them by my own? Following Tolhurst and Levinson, I believe

authors' opinions are not determinative of meaning, and yet they are still a fundamental context to understanding what an artwork does. Texts can only be grasped in context, and the author – who she is, her past history, her biography, what she is trying to do – is an integral, fundamental element of such a context.

Chapter 3 directly tackles the question of how the physical presence of the filmmaker in the film impacts our understanding of what happens in it. One possibly is to conceive of the film as pointing "outwards", as it were, rupturing the expected autonomy and coherence of a discrete story-world, by engaging what we know, or believe we know, about the filmmaker and the world outside the story. While this discussion is very close in spirit to Tomaševskij's investigation of the "biographical legend", the fact that the figures on the screen are concurrently fictional creatures and actual human beings embodying them creates especially interesting conundrums, which do not take place in a similar manner in the area of literature. In chapter 3, I dwell in some detail on the phenomenon of the *mise en abyme*, that is, how the presence of the filmmaker in the film can give the artwork an ability to speak (or hint that it might be speaking) reflexively about itself, about its author, and about the very process of its making. In this regard I look not just at Moretti's works, but also at some of Woody Allen's films, for comparison.

Part One of the dissertation is an attempt at finding a theoretically firm footing for the analysis of Moretti's films, which I then dwell on in more detail in the second part of the project. Part Two divides Moretti's filmography into three periods, but this segmentation is not meant to be stark or dogmatic; other ways of carving up his oeuvre might be salient depending on the questions being asked. In chapter 4, I dwell mostly on *Ecce bombo* (1978), with additional commentary on *I Am An Autarkist* (1976) and *Sweet Dreams* (1981); chapter 5 is squarely dedicated to *Palombella rossa*; and chapter 6 looks in detail at *Dear Diary* (1993), *Aprile* (1998), and *The Caiman* (2006), with occasional observations on *The Son's Room* (2001), *We Have A Pope* (2011), and *Mia madre* (2015). The fact that I make no more than passing references to *Bianca* (1984) and *The Mass is Ended* (1985) should not

be taken to imply these are minor works. Practical concerns about the length of the dissertation have led me to focus more on some films than others, and I chose those that seemed to be more directly relevant to the topics of political commitment and the director's self-representation. Still, there is no intention on my part to downplay the insight to be gained from the study of every single film in Moretti's oeuvre; much to the contrary, "intraoeuvral" comparisons are one of the central methods that I use in the analysis of the films.

In that same spirit of understanding Moretti's work as a coherent whole, the framework offered in chapter 4 provides crucial insight to the understanding of the films discussed in chapters 5 and 6. Features of the art cinema as a mode of narration (as proposed by Bordwell), which I outline in chapter 4, are entirely apposite for making sense of *Palombella rossa* in chapter 5. The combination – and tension – between the two aesthetic paradigms I introduce in chapter 4 (art cinema and Brechtianism) serves to illuminate much of what goes on in the films discussed in chapter 6, namely *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*, and *The Caiman*. Similarly, the discussion of the "dream-like" features of *Palombella rossa*, and of the relationship between the various levels of that film (dreams, daydreams, flashbacks, film-within-the-film, and events "actually" taking place in the story) is directly pertinent to the analysis of later works, such as *Aprile* and *The Caiman*, as I hope to show. *Palombella rossa* seems to play a pivotal role in Moretti's oeuvre, particularly with regard to his stance on political commitment, his attendant ambivalence with regard to rhetoric, his loathing of cliché, and his (not always successful) effort at going beyond it. Similarly, the way *Palombella rossa* complicates our engagement with the protagonist is a crucial tool for a fine-grained understanding of our relationship with the figure of Nanni Moretti, as it emerges with an overt autobiographical guise in later works. Although each of the three chapters of the second part of this thesis focuses on a particular stage of Moretti's career and dedicates special attention to distinct topics, there is – purposely – great thematic overlap between them.

This thesis, particularly in its Part Two, purports to show that Moretti's films can be fruitfully comprehended against the backdrop of two aesthetic traditions which coalesce in many ways, but which also enter into conflict with one other at points – and this conflict itself casts light on the films. It seems important to note that I did not set out to prove that art cinema and Brechtianism were central categories for understanding Moretti's cinema; and my goal is not to pigeonhole the filmmaker as some supposedly highbrow *auteur*, or as a card-carrying Brechtian. As I encountered difficulties and puzzles in the analysis of the films, I was progressively directed towards these frames of reference to make sense of what happens in them, especially on a formal level. In keeping with the discussion in Part One of the thesis, particularly in chapter 2, I strive to explain the films against their historical contexts, and also in relation to the stylistic options available to the filmmaker at a given historical juncture. Art cinema (as a mode of narration) and Brechtianism are two traditions with which Moretti's work is in constant dialogue, and at times explicitly so, as I hope to show.

My work also strives to demonstrate that biographical elements cast an indispensable light on practically all of Moretti's films (even if to varying degrees), but that this is not the same thing as imagining a transparent link between what is depicted in the films and the filmmaker's actual life. Self-representation is filtered through Moretti's particular use of irony, his consistent engagement with paradox, and his Brechtian effort to convey his characters (particularly the protagonists of his films) as riven by internal contradiction. Moreover, while Moretti does abide by some principles of realism – including "objective realism", in the art cinema sense – the notion that his fictional films would try to mirror reality in any direct way is false.

Moretti's films include numerous topical references, which naturally become harder to grasp as they recede from us in time. An appreciation of historical context is therefore particularly crucial for an understanding of what happens in *Ecce bombo* (chapter 4) and *Palombella rossa* (chapter 5). Throughout the dissertation, I make constant reference to the filmmaker's statements, which are generally of great heuristic value to understanding

what Moretti thought he was doing in the films, but this does not force me to assume he has clear, direct access to his own motives, or that he must perforce disclose them transparently. The discussion of elements in the films by the light of the director's views is also meant to show how much there is to be gained from keeping our interpretative efforts in check, scrutinizing them by the light of what can be known about production history and the filmmaker's intentions.

My account of Moretti's oeuvre is not psychological in spirit. I do not aim to reveal the mental mechanisms that led the filmmaker to choose one course of action over another, and I don't suggest the works are the inevitable result of a set of biographical circumstances, as if the films gave us a direct glimpse on Moretti's life or who he *really* is. I generally stay away from speculating about the filmmaker's inner drives. I also do not treat historical events and social context as direct causes for films. Moretti's works *respond* to a historical context, but they do not *mirror* it. Some knowledge about the historical circumstances illuminates what we see in the films because these works speak to issues of their time (in thematic content), and they emerge within the stylistic possibilities available within a given context, as Bordwell would insist.

Finally, I believe that by engaging in these theoretical discussions I have been able to set the analysis of Moretti's films on solid philosophical premises, and thereby get past an all too common reluctance to address the relevance of the filmmaker, as a flesh and bone human being, to film interpretation. Over the last few decades, the predominance of anti-authorist views in the humanities seems to have created a sort of moral panic, in which any reference to authors' intentions and biographical circumstances tends to be hastily dismissed as naïve, pre-theoretical, or simply dangerous. My thesis strives to demonstrate that, on the contrary, a serious engagement with the philosophical issues regarding the author's identity allows us to take a filmmaker's opinions and personal circumstances into consideration, instead of being condemned to equivocate about autobiographical "effects" whose causes remain forever undetermined.

Part 1
Theoretical framework

Chapter 1: **On Authorship**

Introduction

What do we need to know about directorial intentions in order to interpret a film? And how can we know it? Such questions aren't merely prompted by theoretical concerns, but also by problems my research has raised. Watching Nanni Moretti's *We Have a Pope* (*Habemus Papam*, 2011), many critics interpreted the film protagonist's name as a nod to Herman Melville, and more specifically as a reference to Melville's short story *Bartleby, The Scrivener* (1853), since some affinities seem to exist between the protagonist of Moretti's film and the hero of Melville's tale. When asked about it, in an interview for the French magazine *L'Express*, however, Moretti has declared that his protagonist's name has nothing to do with Melville the American author, but rather with French filmmaker Jean-Pierre Melville (1917-1973). To complicate matters, Jean-Pierre Melville is a pseudonym, adopted by the French director (born Jean-Pierre Grumbach) as homage to Melville, the American novelist – something Moretti himself points out in the same interview. Therefore, while Moretti says he did not mean the name of the protagonist of his film to be a hint to *Bartleby*, he still acknowledges that a link may nonetheless exist, implying that there may be more to his film than what he, as director, consciously intended:

> *Q*. The character in *We Have a Pope* is named Melville – like Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick*?
>
> *A*. No, like Jean-Pierre Melville, the filmmaker. I wrote the script for *We Have a Pope* right after organizing a Melville retrospective for the Turin Film Festival, of which I was the director for two years. I used Melville as a placeholder, but little by little I grew attached to the name.
>
> *Q*. Melville is an excellent filmmaker, but the explanation is frustrating. *Moby Dick* is the ultimate unreachable animal. The illusion, the dream, God…
>
> *A*. People generally think of Melville because of Bartleby, who constantly repeats: "I would prefer not to." In fact, it seems that Melville, the filmmaker,

> adopted the alias as homage to the writer, when he was in the French Resistance. If the story is true, then it brings things full circle.[1]

In more general terms, does a director's explanation matter? This question entails at least two problems. One is the issue of sincerity: can we expect the director to disclose his motives transparently? How can we ever know, one way or the other? The second question is more radical: even if directorial intentions could be firmly ascertained, should they have priority over meanings freely attributed by spectators? When a director dismisses an interpretation about his own film, does the critic need to provide good reasons why the director's statement should not be trusted? If one finds meanings in a work that are not confirmed by authorial statements – indeed, if one suggests an interpretation the author actively rejects – must one assume that the intention existed at some, possibly unconscious, level? Or can we proceed with our interpretation just because it is cogent in terms of the work of art itself? If such is the case, why should we bother investigating directorial intentions at all? What relevance is one to ascribe to the comments Moretti has made on his own films? Do we expect authors to control the meanings of their artworks? Do they necessarily understand what they have done, better than anyone else can? In another interview, Moretti says he is not the best interpreter of his own work:

> I think people often understand things about my films that I am completely oblivious to. I don't say this out of modesty. It's just that I am so involved with the films that it's impossible for me to be truly clear-sighted about them.[2]

---

[1] "*Q: Le personnage d'Habemus papam s'appelle Melville. Comme Herman Melville, l'auteur de* Moby Dick*?* A: Non, comme le réalisateur Jean-Pierre Melville. Au moment où j'écrivais le scénario d'Habemus papam, j'avais organisé une rétrospective Melville au festival de Turin, que j'ai dirigé pendant deux ans. C'était un nom provisoire mais, petit à petit, je m'y suis attaché. *Q: Melville est un excellent cinéaste mais l'explication est frustrante. Moby Dick est l'animal inaccessible par excellence. L'illusion, le rêve, Dieu...* A: En général, les gens pensent à Melville pour *Bartleby*, qui dit tout le temps: 'J'aimerais autant pas.' Mais, en fait, il paraît que Melville, le cinéaste, dont ce n'était pas le vrai nom, a choisi ce patronyme lorsqu'il était dans la Résistance en hommage à l'écrivain. Si c'est vrai, la boucle est bouclée" (Libiot 2011).

[2] "Je crois que souvent, les autres comprennent des choses sur mes films que m'échappent totalement. Je ne dis ça par modestie. Simplement, je suis tellement dedans qu'il m'est impossible d'être vraiment lucide" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 65).

While the question of directorial intention is one that film interpretation always needs to address, the issue is vital for my research since I purport to study Moretti's films with particular attention to the ideas they articulate. I suggest that the films have something to say, for instance, about political commitment, that they express some sort of attitude about it. Now, is this a matter of identifying the ideas Moretti consciously expressed through his films, or of discerning relevant thoughts, whether these were intended or not? Do I aim to reconstruct Moretti's own political philosophy, or do I intend to use his films as a springboard for discussing questions that, *in my estimation*, they suggest? I may strive to understand a film in terms of the ideas its author aimed to express, or I may offer an interpretation that is indifferent to whether the filmmaker consciously intended to articulate such ideas or not. If I opt for the latter, though, I may run the risk of circularity, of making the films say what I myself wanted to say. "Who is ultimately responsible for the meanings or significance of the cinematic work [?]" Paisley Livingston asks (2009: 57). This is what Livingston calls "the question of expressive agency," and it is central to his defence of intentionalism: the acknowledgment of authorial intention seems at least to contain the promise of keeping the interpretative enterprise in check.

From a theoretical standpoint, the intentionalist position was unfashionable – it seemed almost untenable – through most of the 20th century. In Anglo-American criticism, the link between literary works and the individuals who penned them had come under attack ever since T.S. Eliot published his seminal essay "Tradition and the individual talent," in 1913. In parallel with this, a second strand, of Continental origin, emerged in the 1960s, attacking authorial interpretations from a more radical angle. These two traditions were to a large degree separate, and even hostile to one another, but together they cast deep suspicion – at least on an academic level – over criticism that would dwell on the author as a person. Of course interviews with authors, as well as biographies, never really went out of fashion, but these were the product not so much of critics or theorists, but of theoretically unreconstructed, and possibly naïve, journalists and historians.

In the words of novelist and critic David Lodge, "the appeal of literary biography is undeniable and irresistible, but cognitively impure" (2014: 3). My goal in the first part of this dissertation is to reclaim the validity, and indeed the pertinence, of authorial intentions and of the author's biography in interpretation. The critique of the author is therefore the point from which I will need to begin my discussion.

The Intentional Fallacy

In 1946, the American literary theorists William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published "The Intentional Fallacy," a manifesto-like piece squarely addressing these kinds of questions. Moving within the larger context of New Criticism (an influential current in academic criticism, especially in the U.S. in the 1940s and 1950s), they aimed to reclaim the text (in their case, particularly the poem) as a self-contained entity to be judged on its own, aesthetic terms. If a larger framework was to be brought into text interpretation, this should be thought of in terms of a distinctively *literary* affiliation, they argued: how the text was informed by a literary *tradition* and by conventions of *genre*. The crucial thing was to avoid explaining the text away through its attachment to an individual – a particular human being, with the accidents and details intrinsic to any biography. Instead, they emphasised close reading as the proper method of literary criticism: the critic must try to grasp the work's internal structure, with due regard to its place within an art form, and in relation to that art form's specific traditions and conventions. In order to restore the integrity of the text, we would need to salvage it from its excessive association with a person. The New Critics' aimed to deal with the text *as* text: not as a symptom of something external to it – such as the author's life or her opinions – but with the text as literature, as artwork.

Wimsatt and Beardsley (1967 [1946]: 5) pronounce the text "detached from the author at birth" – words that bring to mind Roland Barthes's ideas

published a full two decades later.[3] And yet the New Critics' views on authorship are far less radical than those of the French essayist. Wimsatt and Beardsley accept that literary works are ontologically linked to authors, in that they are *caused* by authors: "A poem does not come into existence by accident. The words of a poem, as Professor [Elmer Edgar] Stoll has remarked, come out of a head, not out of a hat" (1967 [1946]: 4).[4] Wimsatt and Beardsley simply want to rescue the study of the text from the author's supposed motives, intentions, or biographical circumstances, for, in their view, the meaning of a text is to be found internally, by looking at how it "functions" as a unit and within a literary tradition, and not in relation to events of social life. "To insist on the designing intellect as a *cause* of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a *standard* by which the critic is to judge the worth of the poet's performance" (1967 [1946]: 4 – emphasis in the original).

The reason why, in Wimsatt and Beardsley's view, authorial intentions are irrelevant to the way a text should be interpreted is actually very simple: either the artist succeeded in doing what she purported to do, and then we shall find all the evidence we need in the artwork itself, or she did not; and, if she did not, there is little point in interrogating the author about an intention that failed. Authorial intentions are therefore redundant when successful, and irrelevant when failed:

> How is [the critic] to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then … the critic must go outside – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967 [1946]: 4)

The notion that, in order to fully understand an author's writings, one should get acquainted with everything that author read – to, as it were,

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[3] Already in 1934, the French poet and essayist Paul Valéry had stated: "The intention of the author has no greater value than that of any reader – since the author's power dies out in the work, which must impose everything" (*apud* Livingston 2005: 141).

[4] Elmer Edgar Stoll (1874-1959) was an American literary scholar whose work focused mostly on Shakespeare.

recreate the echoes the words originally had in the author's mind – is in their view equally misguided. Words belong to language, which is by definition shared, not to an author's peculiarly private universe: intertextual references, if they are pertinent, are to be found through the objective method of textual analysis, not the subjective one of following the author's leads. Interviews with authors are therefore not an appropriate method for literary research: according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, "critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle" (1967 [1946]: 18).

Wimsatt and Beardsley's position relies on a distinction between the literary text and messages of a practical kind, a distinction that is still discussed in philosophical debates about intention to this day. While everyday communication is measured by its ability to produce effects in the real world, and therefore can – indeed must – be assessed against the agent's intention, poems (like all literary works, or artworks in general) can only be said to "communicate" in a very different sense. The success of an artistic "message" cannot be externally assessed, for a poem, a novel, or a film are, to some extent, ends in themselves. "A poem should not mean but be" (1967 [1946]: 4), Wimsatt and Beardsley state, quoting from Archibald MacLeish's poem "Ars Poetica" (1926). An artwork consists in a particular arrangement of signs: words (or images, or sounds) are integral to what the artwork is. Hence, art does not admit paraphrasing: an explication of a poem, a film or a novel cannot possibly convey the "message" of the original artwork. If it fails to resonate, there is no way of conveying the same "message" in another form.

And who, indeed, would be the subject who speaks in an artwork? Who is the voice saying "I" in a poem, a film, or a novel? The voice is not that of the actual person who created the work, but a *dramatic* voice that speaks, as it were, from within the text. What the work says cannot be assumed to coincide with what the author thinks; it is indeed essential to literature that a writer can "toy with" ideas or situations without necessarily embracing them. If a correspondence indeed exists between what the work says and what the author thinks, this can only be ascertained through biographical research – that is, by means that are essentially foreign to literary criticism. Surely the

author lives on outside the text; but so does the text live on independently of the author. "It is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it" (1967 [1946]: 5).

> The meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or state of soul ... But even a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker … to a situation ... We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker,* and if to the author at all, only by an act of biographical inference. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967: 5)

A text can of course be studied for what it tells us about its author: Wimsatt and Beardsley admit that biographical research constitutes "a legitimate and attractive study in itself" (1967 [1946]: 10). Yet they insist that this be treated as a separate realm from textual analysis. "Personal literary studies" (which cover matters such as "author psychology" or "literary biography") are extraneous to literary criticism.[5]

> Certainly it need not be with a derogatory purpose that one points out personal studies, as distinct from poetic studies, in the realm of literary scholarship. Yet there is danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967 [1946]: 10).

Literary studies are characterized by their attention to one particular kind of evidence: such evidence is internal to the text, and also "public," in the sense that it is available to anyone with a sufficient grasp of the language. "It is discovered though the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through *all that makes a language and culture*" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967: 10 – emphasis added). On the other hand, we have biographical studies, which work on external evidence, one that is "private" in nature, since it has to do with a particular individual's life:

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[5] In this respect, their position is not unlike that of Boris Tomaševskij, which I will discuss in chapter 2. The Russian formalist acknowledged the pertinence of biographical studies from the standpoint of cultural history, but not as a branch of artistic studies (Tomaševskij 2002 [1923]: 55).

> What is external [to the text] is private or idiosyncratic; not a part of the work as a linguistic fact: it consists of revelations (in journals, for example, or letters or reported conversations) about how or why the poet wrote the poem – to what lady, while sitting on what lawn, or at the death of what friend or brother. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967 [1946]: 10)

Even though Wimsatt and Beardsley protest their respect for biographical research, some of the examples they summon seem purposefully frivolous, as if to imply that research on authors' lives amounts to little more than celebrity gossip.

However, beyond this basic dichotomy, Wimsatt and Beardsley contemplate a third genus: evidence with an intermediate status that falls between the "public" and the "private" kinds. In some cases, words and phrases carry what they call "private or semiprivate meanings" (1967 [1946]: 10), whose elucidation may require familiarity with some extra-textual piece of information. They admit that

> The meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for *him*, are part of the word's history and meaning. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967 [1946]: 10)

Once this third category is introduced, however, the initial polarity between textual and extratextual evidence is put under stress: the new category itself is amenable to subdivision, between semiprivate meanings that are *closer* to internal evidence and those that have scant relevance for literary interpretation. Using (1) to refer to internal (textual) evidence, (2) to biographical evidence, and (3) to the intermediate category, they ascertain that:

> A critic who is concerned with evidence of type (1) [internal] and *moderately* with that of type (3) [semiprivate] will in the long run produce a different sort of comment from that of the critic who's concerned with (2) [biographical] and with (3) [semiprivate] where it shades into (2) [biographical]. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967 [1946]: 11 – emphasis added)

Wimsatt and Beardsley's use of the adverb "moderately" signals the exact point where the typology crumbles: these are no longer *types*,

theoretical constructs to help the researcher deal with the variety of evidence she will find in the world, but rather *shades* of evidence, which mirror the myriad complications of the real world. In the face of every piece of information, the researcher will have to make a decision on what particular "shade" of semiprivate evidence she is dealing with: at such a point, however, the initial dichotomy will have turned into little more than a plea for the researcher's good sense. Additionally, the third, intermediate category, includes not just the meanings attached to words strictly by the author, but also "by a coterie of which he is a member" (1967 [1946]: 10), and this expands the remit of critical investigation further out, towards historical and sociological analysis. The inescapable corollary of these concessions seems to be that to understand a text merely in its own terms is impossible.

The creation of an intermediate category (of "semiprivate" meanings) signals Wimsatt and Beardsley's reluctant – but inevitable – acknowledgment of the fact that literary texts cannot be interpreted with total disregard for context, including contextual information about authors. While criticism may naturally differ in emphasis – some of it *primarily* focused on the text, other instances devoting larger consideration to biographical, sociological, or historical aspects – it is Wimsatt and Beardsley's *a priori* rejection of the latter's types of evidence that seems unwarranted.

Nonetheless, they usefully point out that in some cases the preoccupation with biographical evidence may not illuminate but rather impede the understanding of a work. Taking as an example the poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," by John Donne (1572-1631), they state that, while attention to Donne's keen interest in the nascent science of astronomy could conceivably "add another shade of meaning" to our understanding of the text, it may also distract our attention from what is crucial about it, which is what indeed lies in plain sight. "To make the geocentric and heliocentric antithesis the core of the metaphor is to disregard the English language, to prefer private evidence to public, external to internal" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1967 [1946]: 14). There is such a thing as knowing too much about the person of the author, to the point that the work

is blocked from view. Where the two types of evidence conflict, we may have to decide what kind of analysis we are primarily interested in, the textual or the extratextual.

While I do not subscribe to Wimsatt and Beardsley's categorical rejection of authorial intention, it is only fair to acknowledge the polemical nature of their piece, which – ironically – may be accounted for by the particular context of its initial publication. Indeed, if one discounts polemical exaggeration, it is striking how much of Wimsatt and Beardsley's discussion of authorial intention is still relevant to present debates. In today's disputes between "actual" and "hypothetical" versions of intentionalism, one of the main points of contention hinges precisely on whether literary texts can be treated on a continuum with practical, everyday communication, or whether they form a special kind of "elocution" to be subjected to particular protocols of interpretation, as the New Critics maintained.

Similarly, Wimsatt and Beardsley's contention that, since language is by definition public, no special familiarity with an author's personal worldview should be required for the task of literary criticism echoes today's "hypothetical" intentionalist's preference for public manifestations of authorial intention (for instance, in interviews) over private ones (e.g., via personal communication).

Even the difficulties Wimsatt and Beardsley ran into in defining the types of biographical information that would be admissible for literary criticism (namely, their introduction of the loose, ambiguous category of "semiprivate" evidence) are remarkably similar to the uncertainties we find in more recent debates on the "biographical legend", which I will address in the next chapter. Such dilemmas have a long, distinguished history.

Barthes: Death of the Author, Birth of the Reader

A more radical challenge to authorship came from the French theorist Roland Barthes in the late 1960s, in the form of a short but immensely influential piece. "The Death of the Author" was originally published in 1967 in the

American journal *Aspen*, and printed the following year in French, in a modified version.

The opening of Barthes' article bears a remarkable affinity with Wimsatt and Beardsley's earlier piece. After quoting a few lines from the novella *Sarrasine* (1830) by Honoré de Balzac (1799-1950), Barthes asks: "Who is speaking thus?" (1977 [1968]: 142) Is this the novelist speaking his mind? Is he articulating the thoughts of an imagined narrator? Those of a character (or characters) in the story? Where we have no means to establish it with any certainty, the issue must be left undecided: we cannot assume the narrator's views to be those of the author. Wimsatt and Beardsley had claimed that, from the moment of its inception, the text must be treated as separate from the person who wrote it. Barthes concurs:

> Writing is the destruction … of every point of origin. Writing is … where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 142)

Barthes' position, furthermore, stands upon the same distinction Wimsatt and Beardsley had made between messages of a practical kind and those of an artistic nature. The literary text exists as an end to itself:

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters its own death, writing begins. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 142 – emphasis in the original)

On the next page, however, Barthes implicitly dissociates himself from the American New Critics by establishing his own, preferred genealogy, entirely composed of French writers from the transition of the 19th to the 20th century: Stephane Mallarmé (1842-1898), Paul Valéry (1871-1945), Marcel Proust (1871-1922), and the Surrealists of the 1920s and 1930s. This nuance signals a subtle twist: what initially seemed to be a general philosophical argument about the literary text is now associated with a particular moment and a specific current in the history of literature. These are all modernist or

quasi-modernist writers, who bring into question the assumptions of transparency which had presided over previous, "realist" fiction. According to Barthes,

> Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee to its full extent the necessity to substitute language for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner ... it is language which speaks, not the author. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 143)

Barthes' view of literature is therefore more impersonal than that of the New Critics. He dissents not just from intentionalism as an interpretative method, but also from authorship as a pertinent critical category. Inspired by linguists working in the wake of Ferdinand de Saussure (1851-1913), Barthes questions the very notion that a text emanates from an author.[6] Of course someone must have composed the words we encounter on the page, but this in itself would not have been enough to create *a text*, for the latter requires the active participation of the reader.

In order to signal a radical departure from the notion of the author, Barthes speaks instead of "scriptor." Differently from the author, the scriptor has no existence outside the text, she is "in no way equipped with a being" (1977 [1968]: 145). In terms of structural linguistics, the scriptor is but a position:

> Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a "subject", not a "person", and this subject [is] empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 145 – emphasis in the original)

By suppressing the author, we can "utterly transform" our understanding of literature, Barthes proposes (1977 [1968]: 145). Meaning will no longer be viewed as something that is, as it were, deposited in the text by an author, waiting only for the reader to come and decipher it. Because language moulds the very thoughts it was supposed to merely convey, "writing can no longer designate an operation of recoding, notation, representation, 'depiction'" (1977

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[6] Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, posthumously published in 1916, would have an enormous impact in social and literary theory from the late 1950s onwards.

[1968]: 145). Reading is not the discovery of a text's prior, "authentic" meaning. The text is no longer seen as the more or less imperfect reflection of a pre-existing, immanent idea.

Barthes contrasts the traditional outlook, under the overbearing preoccupation with the author, with the new situation as he envisions it. Authorship, according to Barthes, is the belief in an entity that stands in relation to the text as both its creator and its owner, an omnipotent being obviously modelled upon God:

> The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book … The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 145 – emphasis in the original)

In its place, the concept of the scriptor is meant to signal a radically different way of thinking about writing and about texts:

> In complete contrast, the *modern* scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 145 – emphasis added)

With this, Barthes deflates the creative role usually attributed to the author. While a text is formed through a particular, possibly unique combination of signs, these have meaning only in language, in combination and opposition to other signs. It is only through the cumulative process of being used in relation to other words that words mean anything at all: indeed, rather than a fixed sense, words have a history, carrying with them the contextual associations they took on when used in previous sentences. An individual does not express herself with ideas that directly stem from her own mind: she speaks, or writes, in language, which therefore functions as an archive of available meanings, "a ready-formed dictionary" (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 146).

As a consequence, the text itself must no longer be thought of as a self-contained unit. “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 146). It is neither unified nor unique. The writer is not a creator working from “inspiration”, from “genius”, for she can only express herself in words she did not invent, over which she has no control. Originality is all but impossible:

> [The writer’s] only power is to mix writings ... Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner “thing” he thinks to “translate” is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 146 – emphasis in the original)

Far from a self-evident, natural category, Barthes sees authorship as a set of beliefs created at a specific historical juncture, which over time came to be perceived as natural. This ideology, which according to Barthes “tyrannically” dominates “ordinary culture”, holds that

> The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* “confiding” in us. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 143 – emphasis in the original)

Instead of being a universal phenomenon, authorship became predominant only in a particular kind of society at a particular moment. “In ethnographic societies”, Barthes (rather loosely) asserts

> the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose “performance” – the mastery of the narrative code – may possibly be admired, but never his “genius”. The author is a modern figure, a product of our society … the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 142-143)

Barthes shares common ground with the New Critics to the extent that all of them believe that artworks (literary works, in particular) are *not* to be understood as some secret, elaborate manner an artist has of conveying what she really thinks or feels; and, conversely, interpretation is *not* a matter of decoding the artist’s original intention. While both Barthes and anti-

intentionalists refuse to search for the real person behind the text, they do so, however, for different reasons. Wimsatt and Beardsley follow this route in order to give the text their undivided attention. They are still looking for the best possible explanation – indeed, it is in the name of this search that they dismiss authorial intention, which they see as a misleading interpretative strategy. While they are not interested in authors as real people, they still abide by authorship as an organizing principle of criticism, so much so that they take the ensemble of texts produced by an author, the *oeuvre*, as a perfectly legitimate object of critical enquiry. From this standpoint, far from undermining the author, New Critics have reinforced its clout – and for this they must be criticized, in Barthes' estimation.[7]

Barthes, on the other hand, dismisses both the notion of the author as a unified subject, and that of the text as a coherent unit. The writing on the page creates an illusion of wholeness, but "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination": not in the author, at the point of production, but in the reader at the point of reception (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 148). This reader is not, furthermore, any one reader in particular. Meanings are always contextual and transient, dependent on the specific circumstances of the act of reading; therefore, every single act of reading constitutes the text anew.

Barthes' aim is to "open up" the entire game of interpretation: to suppress the author so as to give the reader her due creative freedom. He renounces the notion that there might be any permanent way of establishing that one interpretation is "better" than another. He does not count himself as a "new" critic; on the contrary, he dispenses with critics altogether – with critics as licensed, professional interpreters of literary texts.

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author … beneath the work. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 147)

[7] "The sway of the Author remains powerful (the new criticism has often done no more than consolidate it)" (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 143).

The "death of the Author" opens the space for "the birth of the reader" (1977 [1968]: 148), which simultaneously entails the death of the critic as accredited interpreter:

> There is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic, nor again in the fact that criticism (be it new) is today undermined along with the Author. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 147)

Barthes claims the author (or, rather, the "Author") has been endowed with God-like properties. There is an element of religious superstition, he implies, in the awe with which this figure is usually treated. His "death of the Author" implicitly evokes Nietzsche's "death of God," and, like Nietzsche's proclamation, it is conceived of as a liberating event of transcendental importance:

> This way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a "secret", an ultimate meaning, to the text … liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and its hypostases – reason, science, law. (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 147 – emphasis in the original.)

Barthes' anti-authorism is conceived as a form of anti-authoritarianism, as part of the larger movements that came to define the late 1960s. In the post-authorial – possibly post-capitalist – world Barthes envisions, there will be no professional critics, for every reader will be a critic, a purveyor of meaning. This reader will not be a specific reader who delivers the true meaning of a text – not a creature with a particular "history, biography, psychology" (Barthes 1977 [1968]: 148) – but *any* reader, recreated in the very act of reading.

Authorship and the oeuvre: Foucault's author-function

Like Barthes, Foucault redirects our attention towards reception: for both theorists, texts are not so much authored as read. But while for Barthes this results in the infinite multiplication of texts (each text corresponding to an

act of reading), Foucault's analysis has a more historical-sociological bent: it looks at how authorship is "constructed" by a community of critics. While Barthes opens up to sheer indeterminacy, Foucault paves the way for a historicization of reading.

Central to Foucault's argument is the concept of *oeuvre*, the sum total of an author's creations. Foucault offers Shakespeare as an example: were we to find out that the English playwright did not write the sonnets which are attributed to him, our understanding of his plays would be transformed. Conversely, if we were to find out that Shakespeare wrote all that is currently credited to him in addition to, say, Bacon's *Organum*, this would equally alter our understanding of the works we currently attribute to Shakespeare (1977 [1969]: 122). When we change what we consider to be part of the *oeuvre*, subtle changes of interpretation occur in relation to each single artwork: by altering the whole, we change the meaning of the parts. In this sense, it is the *oeuvre* that produces the author, not the other way around.

In recent years, the French theorist Pierre Bayard (2010) has played with this idea, showing how we could come up with novel – and interesting – interpretations of a number of classical works, were we simply to imagine they had different authors. He dissects, amongst others, *Hamlet* as if it had been written by Edward de Vere,[8] Camus' *The Stranger* by Kafka, *Gone With the Wind* by Tolstoy, and Spinoza's *Ethics* by Freud; a chapter teasingly finds Alfred Hitchcock's distinctive authorial traits in *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925). In each case, Bayard demonstrates (by example) how interpretation is strongly impacted by what we think we know about a (supposed) author's life and about the other works which form said author's *oeuvre*. The exercise is Foucauldian in spirit: rather than calling for the transcendence of an authorial approach (as Barthes might), it aims instead to reveal how arbitrary the concept of authorship is, and how deeply it inflects our way of thinking about texts. Foucault shows the definition of what belongs in the *oeuvre* is not a given, but itself the product of critical work,

[8] De Vere (1550-1604) was the 17th Earl of Oxford and a contemporary of William Shakespeare. According to some theories, he would be the real person behind Shakespeare's works.

which then impacts the way we interpret each text: "The fact that a number of texts were attached to a single name implies that relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentification, or of common utilization were established among them" (Foucault 1977 [1969]: 123).

Such relationships have to be established by someone: the definition of what counts as part of the *oeuvre* requires an intentional act of delimitation. But the person – or rather, persons – performing this intentional act is not necessarily the author herself, and in any event not just her. Since authorship is a social institution, it relies on a number of accepted protocols that establish and authenticate a relation between author and text. Authorship is not a brute fact, preexisting all theory, that guides critics in their effort to understand and appreciate texts; authorship itself is the product of criticism. It requires validation by the community of critics.

In Foucault's view, the concept of "authorship" conflates a human being and a critical category, explaining the features of a text by reference to the person who wrote it, and offering the writer as embodied proof of the essential unity it assumes to lay behind the text. That such an essential unity exists is neither demonstrated nor questioned; it is, instead, the premise that organizes critical enquiry. It is a "belief", which postulates an overarching coherence beneath an assemblage of disparate works:

> The author explains the presence of certain events within a text … and this through an author's biography or by reference to his particular point of view … Any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence. (Foucault 1977 [1969]: 128)

Since the works in an oeuvre supposedly stem from a single source, they are treated as if they carried a genetic mark; and the work of the critic makes itself all the more necessary where such coherence is hidden, in order to uncover it. A paradigmatic example, in the field of cinema, would be that of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics in the late 1950, striving to reveal the authorial marks in Howard Hawks' films, thus far assumed to be almost factory-made products.

While the writer as a human being literally exists as a thing in the world, the author does not. In order to signal the distance between the author as an actual person and the author as this idea of *source*, Foucault refers to the latter by the term “author-function”:

> Governing this function is the belief that there must be – at a particular level of an author’s thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire – a point where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements [of a text] can be shown to relate to one another or to cohere … (Foucault 1977 [1969]: 128)

Like Barthes, Foucault notices a similarity between critical interpretation and the religious kind. The methods modern criticism employs to establish the authorial identity of a text are “strongly reminiscent of Christian exegesis,” he points out (1977 [1969]: 127). Saint Jerome (347-420 AD) stipulated four criteria a text had to meet in order to be rightfully accepted as part of the Bible: a “standard level of quality”, a certain coherence in terms of ideas, some basic stylistic unity, and historical compatibility with the gospels. If the Bible is the word of God, and not some accidental assortment of texts, then its every detail fulfils a function in the whole, and no part of it can be deemed trivial; no parable, no fragment, no word less important than the next. Modern criticism has put the Author in the place of God, and treats it with the corresponding reverence. Once the Author is perceived to be this large, overarching unity, the integrity of the oeuvre is assumed, so that any anomaly must be explained either by showing how it coheres at a deeper level, or by ascribing it to external factors which prevented the author from fully manifesting herself.[9] Again, this idea is easily transposable to the cinema, where meddling, devilishly producers who interfere in a director’s work, preventing the authorial voice from manifesting itself in a film, are a common story.

Finally, Foucault argues that our current ideas about authorship – namely, about what kinds of text require an author, and which ones do not – have changed throughout history. Even today, not every type of text is

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[9] A neat illustration of this idea will come up in chapter 6, in the context of competing readings of purportedly “ugly” features of Moretti’s *The Caiman* (*Il caimano*, 2006).

thought of as having an author. Foucault offers the example of Nietzsche, who, having suffered a complete and irreversible mental breakdown in the midst of a period of feverish activity, died without being able to make final editing decisions on many of the things he had written. Over the next three decades, it was the German philosopher's sister who made such decisions on his behalf, creating endless problems for future interpreters to figure out what should rightfully be considered as belonging in the oeuvre:

> If we wish to publish the complete works of Nietzsche, for example, where do we draw the line? Certainly, everything must be published, but can we agree on what "everything" means? We will, of course, include everything Nietzsche himself published, along with the drafts of his works, his plans for aphorisms, his marginal notations and corrections. But what if, in a notebook filled with aphorisms, we find a reference, a reminder of an appointment, an address, or a laundry bill, should this be included? (1977 [1969]: 118)

Whether a text is deemed worthy of being authored is a function of prevailing social conventions, rather than of its intrinsic properties. While scientific texts have "lost" their authors (in the sense that authorship is now deemed irrelevant to their truth content), literary texts, which for so long were treated as anonymous, have become crucially authored:

> There was a time when these texts which we now call "literary" (stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies) were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author ... Texts, however, that we now call "scientific" (dealing with cosmology and the heavens, medicine or illness, the natural sciences or geography) were only considered truthful during the Middle Ages if the name of the author was indicated. (Foucault 1977 [1969]: 125-6).

Foucault is one of a number of theorists who signal the logical gulf that separates the author who was at the origin of the text from the entity that appears to the reader – "as a chimera" – in the act of reading. While the former is an actual person, the latter is a mental construct – a "surrogate author". In C. Paul Sellors' apt summary,

> Theorists endorsing these views rightly point out that the flesh-and-blood human(s) that produced a film or a work of literature is logically distinct from

> the entity that appears as a chimera in a text during the acts of reading and spectating. Authors produce works, readers produce author surrogates through their engagement with works. (2010: 56).

However, author-surrogate theories create a logical quandary: if the author-surrogate is the *product* of an act of reading, then the interpretation must refer to something outside itself. This external thing is the work – as it was created by actual people. If the author itself were the product of the reading, how could a specific interpretation ever be contested or refuted? Under such circumstances, one could even hardly call it an "interpretation", the object supposedly being interpreted having vanished. "Author surrogate theories are circular", Sellors points out, for "the author surrogate is itself an interpretation and cannot therefore be responsible for or prompt that interpretation" (2010: 56). Even if in practice we end up being able to trace only some of the ideas we understand about a film back to the authorial source, the notion that such a source exists is crucial. The author is a limit: "It signals that I, the reader, did not write the text."[10]

Conclusion

Some works, because of their seemingly confessional nature, or because of their autobiographical overtones, can lure the reader or spectator to assume that they express the author's states of mind. Moretti's films – one of which is titled *Dear Diary* (*Caro diario*, 1993), many of which avowedly draw on their director's personal experiences, and several of which feature non-professional actors playing under their own names – are amongst those where the temptation to translate film events and characters' features directly into events and features of the director's life and mind is strongest. But the pull of such a *direct* biographical reading needs to be resisted.

The use of information about the life or opinions of an author to cast light on the work has long been treated with caution, nay suspicion, in academic criticism. A distinction must be made between the real-life

[10] "Um autor é o limite que me faz saber que não fui eu quem escreveu aquilo; o limite que me significa que também eu, leitor, não sou um demiurgo" (Gusmão 2011: 104).

individual who happened to write a text or direct a film (the opinions such a person holds in their actual life, the details of a biography) and the author of the work *as author*. Such a distinction has been maintained in a more or less radical fashion. For some (notably Barthes), the work should be treated as if it had no author at all. The notion of authorship implies that the person who wrote a text can speak as its proprietor, but in fact the writer's role evaporates as soon as she stops writing. At most, one could say that such a person once penned such text, but whatever happened to that person before or after would be irrelevant to its understanding. Barthes thinks it is impossible to identify the author's point of view as if this was something stable that we could refer to, something which exists somewhere in the world beyond the text.

In other views, it is not so much the concept of authorship as such that is at stake, but the risks posed by intentionalism and biographism as interpretative strategies. Intentionalism (the idea that the key to interpreting an artwork lies in whatever the artist aimed to do when she created it) and its frequent companion biographism (the notion that the features of the artwork will be explained by reference to the artist's life) are misleading interpretative strategies, or "fallacies". Biographical information about an author can create the illusion of providing a definitive explanation, but in fact this kind of elucidation takes away from the properly artistic context, in favour of an individualistic, often psychological account of the work's motivations. Works of art, the New Critics pointed out, are forms of expression constrained by a medium and a historical tradition, in which the very possibilities of that medium are explored, its limits tested. The establishment of a direct link between biography and work downplays the more significant connections that couch a piece within an art form. Even if we were able to establish some relationship between an artwork and the particular life events and opinions of an author, this would only provide us with impoverished interpretative hypotheses, built on non-artistic grounds, which would impede rather than advance our comprehension of the art form, and diminish rather than enhance the aesthetic experience. We should prefer

explanations that focus on artistic criteria, whose reliability is not only easier to assess but which produce a deeper kind of understanding.

This point of view is furthermore partaken by many artists. Some go to great lengths to prevent any information about themselves from becoming public, believing such material constitutes a distraction that takes the mind of the audience away from its engagement with the work. In the history of modern literature, the severance of the link between the biographical person and the name of the author has been particularly crucial for women, providing female writers with a sphere of artistic freedom where they were able to express thoughts which might otherwise not have been socially acceptable. As the cultural critic Alexandra Schwartz (2016) has recently pointed out, “To publish as a woman was to be categorized as trivial, sentimental, concerned with life’s petty surface questions rather than its deep truths.” Arguably, such gendered history is still with us: in the recent public uproar around the (supposed) revelation – against her will – of Italian novelist Elena Ferrante’s true identity, several people have noted that curiosity about female figures is inordinately concerned with questions of physical appearance, marital status, and sexual mores. In *The Guardian*, the British novelist Jeanette Winterson (2016) points JK Rowling as a recent example of a writer who decided to hide her gender so as to escape the effects of stereotyping: “Rowling knew boys wouldn’t read her books if she was called Joanne.” The German language has a word – *Maskenfreiheit* – for the freedom that comes from wearing masks.

If, despite all efforts, the indiscreet inquirer manages to pierce through such protections, the infringement is often perceived not just as a violation of the personal interests or wishes of the artist, but as an injury committed against *the artwork*. From this standpoint, an artist’s evasion from public space does not necessarily derive from a subjective preference for privacy, but is rather the price the artist feels she must pay to protect the integrity of the work from undue biographical intrusion. There is something to be gained on the part of the audience, the argument goes, from not knowing too much about the artist. In fact, this was central to Barthes’ position: undue authorial

intrusion curtails the reader's freedom, the imaginative play. However, the idea of a pristine situation where the reader meets the text unconstrained by any external information about it is hardly realistic. It may perhaps be conceived as an operative myth, one that invites us to pay attention to the active role the reader plays with regards to the text, but Barthes himself never suggested that such condition did obtain in real life.

The vast majority of artists, too, do not simply choose between absolute transparency about themselves and radical retreat from the public space. Even writers, like Ferrante, who hide behind a pseudonym in an effort to protect their privacy still often feel the need to make some purportedly biographical "confessions". In fact, as Merve Emre and Len Gutkin aptly point out, by giving the same proper name to herself as author and to the protagonist of her novels, Ferrante *does not attempt* to disappear as an author; instead, she implies "the fantasy of radical authorial self-exposure across all four novels", playing with how readers will imagine the author in relation to the narrator. "To thrill to the magical possibilities of a pseudonym is not to *avoid* the biographical. It is to undergo a special variation on it" (Emre and Gutkin 2016 – emphasis in the original). Since the information about an artist that does impact on the reception of the artwork is never the entirety of said artist's life, but a representation, there is room for the author to perform her own identity in a strategic manner. Rather than thinking about this under the guise of autobiography, it would be more apposite to describe it as the creation of "biographical legend" – a concept I will examine in the next chapter.

In Moretti's case, there has always been a strong suggestion that characters played by him to some extent represented the filmmaker himself; but what later films have made patently clear is that other characters can also embody some of his personal traits. In later films, such as *The Caiman*, *We Have A Pope* (2011), or *Mia madre* (2015), Moretti plays supporting roles that embody some of his personal traits, *alongside* protagonists who are also partial stand-ins for the director; therefore, one must resist the temptation to

read *one* character as the direct emanation of the author.[11] Virtually all narrative fiction rests on a play of voices, whereby several agents, usually called characters, embody different perspectives: several of them may express the writer's point of view, but none of them do so entirely. "Writing is an act of splitting," Winterson claims, defending Ferrante's right to self-fictionalize. "Writers are multiple personalities."

Winterson, however, does not merely argue that the "I" of Ferrante's novels is a fictional entity; rather, she asserts that Elena Ferrante, the author of the books, is herself a fictional creation. That is why Winterson refers to the *person* behind the work as "the woman who is and is not Elena Ferrante", or "the creator of both Ferrante and Ferrante's books". The critic is referring here to the Italian writer as the creator of both a literary oeuvre and of a biographical legend (for instance through the disclosure of purportedly autobiographical information in interviews).[12] Still, there needs to be an actual person (or several of them) behind the creation of the books and of the legend: an *author* must exist.

The (pseudo) autobiographical bits of information a writer like Ferrante shares with her readers belong neatly to the realm of literary self-creation; the ones a journalist unearths about the actual person who would have written the books may be relevant from the standpoint of biographical criticism. The latter material belongs to biography, while the first one pertains to the "biographical legend". A conflict is bound to occur, however, when the author wants to keep control over the *persona*, for then she must defend it against the biographical approach. The facts unearthed by the journalist about Ferrante, for instance, do not match those the novelist had publicized about herself; crucially, against what her "confessions" imply, the writer would not have first-hand knowledge about the world she describes in the novels.

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[11] In chapter 6 I will consider this issue in detail with regard to *The Caiman*, especially in a section titled "Who is Moretti now?"

[12] In 2003, Ferrante published a book collection of interviews and other (pseudo-)autobiographical writings (*Frantumaglia*, New York: Europa, 2016). The Italian writer is playful about these pseudo-confessions: at several points in the book she makes clear that readers should take her word at their peril.

What is at issue in this controversy is not whether information about the author impacts the way the work it is received: it patently does. What critics like Winterson defend is the novelist's freedom to define these parameters however she pleases. The identification of the author's name with the writer's *actual* biography, Winterson claims, is an act of violence perpetrated by the reporter on the writer, imposing his own preferred angle on the artwork, to the detriment of the artist's perspective:

> By forcing us to concentrate on biography and bank accounts … [Claudio] Gatti [the journalist who purportedly revealed Ferrante's identity] has invaded the space that belongs to the work. He has swivelled the lens so that we are looking at the writer through his eyes instead of looking at the work in its own right. (Winterson 2016)

But Winterson's argument here is paradoxical. On the one hand, the critic seems to align herself with an extreme anti-authorist position by propounding there is no actual person we can refer to behind the artwork: she claims writers are by definition "multiple personalities", with no unified self to refer back to. On the other, she confers sovereign rights of literary self-creation to this self-disappearing, ghostly figure. It seems hard to have it both ways.

The discrepancy in Winterson's reasoning goes to the heart of an often overlooked, yet crucial difference between Barthes and Foucault. Because both cast a critical eye on the traditional understanding of authorship, their ideas are often conflated, even though their conclusions point in almost opposite directions. Foucault never purports to release the text from the hold of the author; on the contrary, the historical-sociological thrust of his argument is to show the role authorship plays in shaping our experience of interpreting texts (or at least certain types thereof). There is no question, for Foucault, or wishing for a different state of affairs, and he offers no injunctions against interpreting texts by the light of their authors' biographies or opinions. Foucault proposes caution and suspicion in the way we approach the self-evident authorial figure: he urges us to pay attention to the sociological work behind the construction of this figure. In their

contribution to the debate on Ferrante, Emre and Gutkin (2016) articulate this point with remarkable clarity:

> From at least the eighteenth century on, the reading of novels has been inextricable from the development of ideas about authors – from the experience, that is, of biography, however fantasized, projected, or invented. … the "theory of the author-function" (at least as developed by Foucault) in no way expels biographical considerations from the interpretation of texts. In fact, it describes considerations of "the author" as central to encounters with literary texts.

Such a call for sociological awareness seems very welcome indeed. Where I think Foucault goes too far is in suggesting that, ultimately, the author's name does not denote an actual human being. In a manner akin to Winterson, the French theorist asserts the author is characterized by "a plurality of egos", and that there just is no such thing as the real, authentic person hidden beneath the mask. "We are not dealing with a system of dependencies where a first and essential use of the 'I' is reduplicated, as a kind of fiction, by the other[s]" (Foucault 1977 [1969]: 130). Like Winterson's, his argument rests on a parallel with what obtains with characters within fiction: "It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator," Foucault claims (1977 [1969]: 129). To suppose the author's name is attached to a real human being would be tantamount to assuming that the "I" in the tale matches the writer's point of view.

We are pushed here to what the novelist and critic Tim Parks (2018) has called "the perplexing question" of what it means to be a person: when we talk about identity, what is it supposed to be *identical* to?

> Behind the debate about whether this or that character in a novel is identical to the writer – auto-fiction – lies the perplexing question of selfhood: what does it mean to be a person and to have an identity at all? Rather than a stable state, [Philip] Roth suggests, selfhood is a perpetual performance.

But the idea that selfhood itself is merely a succession of performances, with no overarching coherence, that each and every act (whether in writing or in

daily life) is always situational, runs into a very obvious problem: there still needs to be some agent to do the performing.

Chapter 2: **The question of the author's identity**

> We want to know the filmmakers' secrets, especially those they don't know they know.
> (Bordwell 2008: 22)

Introduction

The arguments adduced so far lead me to conclude that we need an author; but the question remains as to what kind of author we should pursue. Who is this figure, how are we to find it, and in what ways will it account for the features of the artwork? Those are issues I shall investigate in this chapter.

To guide the enquiry, I will look at the concept of the "biographical legend" as a possible framework for exploring the relationship between an artist and her art. The concept seems promising because it offers a middle ground, neither relying naively upon the possibility of distilling the ultimate meaning of a life, nor discarding biographical information altogether. By acknowledging the "legendary" aspect of biography, it may be particularly suited for engaging with a director like Moretti, whose films often play upon similarities between some of the events depicted and facets of the actor-director's actual life. The films push biography to the forefront, and yet they do so in a playful way, mixing the factual and the fictional. As a consequence, when the name "Moretti" and the adjective "Morettian" come up, one frequently encounters grave equivocation as to what these terms are supposed to refer to: do they apply to characteristics of the director personally, or the characters he embodies, or of the films as a group?

In an initial section, I will set out to explain the main components of the concept of biographical legend as it was originally proposed, in 1923, by the Russian literary theorist Boris Tomaševskij (1890-1957). I will then look at David Bordwell's appropriation of this concept, and at his main innovation in its regard: the emphasis the film scholar puts on the link between the artist's legend and the historical context. Bordwell sees the legend as a device by which the artist tries to respond to the problems she is confronted with at

a given historical juncture. By framing biographical self-representation as a response to these problems, Bordwell promises to reconcile the study of individual lives with historical forces. He addresses an anxiety that constantly haunts biographical studies: the danger that a focus on a person's life and actions may come at the price of concealing the crucial role played by the larger social context, in the end impeding rather than advancing our understanding of a historical situation.

Both Tomaševskij and Bordwell crucially recognize the central place an author's identity plays in the way we interpret artworks. (The Russian Formalist would qualify this statement by saying that the author's identity is relevant only when the text alludes to it). Simply put, both agree we cannot understand an artwork without reference to the artist's *persona*, which comprises some version of the artist's biography. However, at the end of the first part of this chapter, I will take issue with the strict separation, advocated by both Tomaševskij and Bordwell, between a legitimate interest in the biographical legend and an allegedly superfluous one in factual biography. I challenge the notion that the legend exists as a social fact, as something that can be ascertained without going into the trouble of investigating the actual biographical details. The question I will raise is ultimately whether the author we pursue is a real human being – the biographical author – or merely a theoretical construct that appears to the spectator as a plausible hypothesis, as a projection, as a spectre (the legend).

This issue is at the heart of current debates on authorial intention, which I tackle in the second part of the chapter. Is the author we target in interpretation the flesh and bone human being, or our best projection of it? This problem is crucial for the debates on authorial intention, because we are called upon to decide whether what matters is what an author really, in their heart of hearts, intended to mean with an artwork, or just what we are most justified in believing she may have meant, within the bounds of the evidence that is already available to the public. This will also have consequences for the question of whether what we do when we interpret art includes something akin to an attempt at mind reading; and also when, under what

circumstances, we are allowed to disbelieve an author's suggested interpretations for their own work.

I do not reach a final position on this controversy: what I do, within the limits of this dissertation, is signal what I see as the main advantages and drawbacks of each position, and explain how the strong points of actual and hypothetical intentionalism are closely intertwined with each position's handicaps, so that one cannot simply ditch the latter and keep the former. In conclusion, I take relative comfort in the fact that the difference between these two variants of intentionalism is, in the vast majority of cases, small to non-existent.[1] The common ground these various views share – with a particular emphasis in the writings of Bordwell and Jerrold Levinson – is the idea that art interpretation requires thick grounding in context, namely historical context. And this is the understanding that will then frame my analysis of Moretti's films, in Part Two of the dissertation.

The "biographical legend" as a paratext

The biographical legend can be thought of as an instance of a more general phenomenon the French literary theorist Gérard Genette has studied under the concept of the "paratext". Paratexts are pieces of information about a work and its author which are external to the work as such but have an impact – and are *intended* to have an impact – in the way the audience receives it. Metaphorically, the paratext is located at the threshold between the text and the outside world. The concept of the paratext calls attention to the fact that literary texts are seldom presented raw; at a minimum, they are generally accompanied by the author's name, a title, a preface.

The paratext indicates how the text is to be read – it consists in the *delivery*, as it were – and therefore it is crucially linked to authorial intention. Early in his book, Genette writes that "the paratext … is characterized by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility" (1997 [1987]: 3), an idea

[1] But not in all cases: in an instigating discussion of the performance artist Andy Kaufman (1949-1984), Noël Carroll (2013) strives to show that the differences between actual and hypothetical intentionalism can sometimes be of practical consequence.

he reiterates towards the end, insisting: "The main issue for the paratext is … to assume for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose" (1997 [1987]: 407). Meanwhile, Genette acknowledges that the publisher also often exerts a measure of control over paratextual elements.

Writing in the 1920s, Tomaševskij had been particularly preoccupied with the way some version of the author's biography often moulds the public reception of a text. The term "legend" denotes that the biographical story that frames a literary work need not always be a reliable account of the author's life; on the other hand, the representation is not necessarily false, either. Tomaševskij (2002 [1923]: 47) was less interested in biography as such – and therefore in its reliability or lack thereof – but rather in how this biographical story "operates in the consciousness" of the reader. What matters about the legend is its psychological and social impact – what we could call its paratextual functions – rather than its factual trustworthiness.

Like later authors, Barthes and Foucault in particular, Tomaševskij notes that authorship has not always been the primordial way of understanding artworks. Up until the 18th century, he claims, the artist's name was often ignored. The situation changed with the European Enlightenment, when some figures emerged who were no longer merely writers, but public intellectuals:

> Voltaire and Rousseau, like many of their contemporaries, were prolific in many genres, from musical comedies to novels and philosophical treatises, from epigrams and epitaphs to theoretical articles on physics and music. *Only their lives could have united these various forms of verbal creation into a system*. This is why their biographies, their letters and memoirs, have become such an integral part of their literary heritage. (Tomaševskij 2002 [1923]: 49 – emphasis mine.)

As soon as these authors become established, recognized names, every single one of their disparate creations is seen in a new light, accorded a new relevance: it is interpreted as part of a larger whole, the author's *oeuvre*. Furthermore, once authorship is seen as a central category to understand artworks, the artist's very life becomes as suggestive as the artworks. Life

events are structured in a narrative, a story which potentially expresses meaning. This being so, the artist develops a stake in controlling the production of such narrative. According to Tomaševskij,

> The knowledge that their biographies were a constant background for their works compelled Voltaire and Rousseau to dramatize certain epic motifs in their own lives and, furthermore, to create for themselves an artificial legendary biography composed of intentionally selected real and imaginary events. (2002 [1923]: 49)

The narrative of an artist's life becomes an intentional creation; it is as if life itself was part of the oeuvre, to the point where it is no longer possible to say whether art faithfully documents life, or whether the artist's life is ("artificially", as Tomaševskij puts it) fashioned according to literary models. He evokes the case of Lord Byron (1788-1824), the epitome of the romantic poet:

> Following in the footsteps of [Voltaire and Rousseau], Byron, the poet of sharp-tempered characters, created the canonical biography for a lyrical poet. A biography of a Romantic poet was more than the biography of an author and public figure. The Romantic poet *was* his own hero. His *life* was poetry, and soon there developed a canonical set of actions to be carried out by the poet. (2002 [1923]: 49 – emphases in the original.)

Tomaševskij signals "the penetration of literary clichés into reality" (2002 [1923]: 51), and it seems noteworthy, in this connection, to point out that Freud's understanding of the human psyche strongly relies upon literary models, notably those borrowed from Greek mythology.

For Tomaševskij, however, one should not assume that all artists have a biographical legend. The legend only makes sense "to the extent that the literary work includes references to 'biographical' facts" (2002 [1923]: 52) – only when the text itself invites this kind of engagement. Furthermore, the quotes around the word *biographical* alert us to Tomaševskij's scepticism about biography as such. In his view, to investigate the biography of a writer whose work makes no allusion to it would be superfluous. On the other hand, for those artists who do include biographical references in their works, the

study of the biography is mandatory, but only in relation to the literary aspect:

> In [these] works themselves the juxtaposition of the texts and the author's biography plays a structural role. The literary work plays on the potential reality of the author's subjective outpourings and confessions. (Tomaševskij 2002 [1923]: 55)

The object of Tomaševskij's attention is self-referentiality not as fact (mere autobiography) but as intentional play. The autobiographical allusion prompts the reader (or spectator) to entertain the possibility that the events depicted in the story *may* obtain in real life, and this effect is sometimes at the heart of what a literary work (or a film) is trying to achieve. This is clearly central to Elena Ferrante's novels (which I alluded to in the previous chapter) and in the work of filmmakers such as Woody Allen and Nanni Moretti, which I will address in detail in chapter 3.

Tomaševskij both reclaims the pertinence of a biographical approach to the study of literature and imposes strict limits to the kinds of biographical information admissible. Biography in general may be of interest to social historians, but the biographical legend is the specific province of art and literature critics. While all artists have lives, and hence a factual biography, not all of them have a literary biography – a legend.

> Thus the biography that is useful to the literary historian is not the author's curriculum vitae or the investigator's account of his life. What the literary historian really needs is the biographical legend created by the author himself. Only such a legend is a *literary fact.* (Tomaševskij 2002 [1923]: 55 – emphasis in the original.)

Confronted with a case like Ferrante's, where a journalistic investigation directly contradicts the writer's (pseudo)autobiographical confessions, it seems Tomaševskij would not hesitate, preferring to keep the legend (the "literary fact") and ignore the *actual* fact. The perspective the Russian theorist takes here is very similar to that expressed by Wimsatt and Beardsley, when they tried to define what types of evidence would be pertinent to literary criticism: they wanted to leave all extraliterary aspects

to be studied by psychologists or social historians. But the dilemmas Tomaševskij runs into, which I will expand on below, also bring to mind those I have already addressed in relation to the New Critics in the previous chapter.[2]

Biographical legend and historical context

David Bordwell imported the concept of the biographical legend into the discipline of film studies and, in the process of doing so, significantly modified it. Bordwell's main innovation: the legend is not merely a personal or idiosyncratic product of the artist's imagination, but rather the result of an encounter between the artist and the historical context. According to Bordwell, any artist, upon entering a professional field, encounters a pre-existing situation that poses specific challenges. The legend articulates the way the artist sees herself transforming such a situation, thereby fulfilling, for the artist, "historical and aesthetic functions" (Bordwell 1981: 10). The "legend seeks to clear a space for itself, and in so doing must dislodge, rearrange, and contest certain dominant models" (Bordwell 1981: 10). In this sense, the legend is a subjective account of the historical situation.

If the formula seems overly abstract, we can try to pin it down by looking at how it works in Bordwell's monographs on individual directors. In the first of these, on Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968), Bordwell identifies in the following terms the historical dilemma the Danish filmmaker was faced with: was film just a mass-produced commodity for the entertainment of the crowds, or could it be art? Bordwell points out that this question was specific to Dreyer's time, in that the previous generation had not faced it: cinema pioneers such as the Lumière brothers, Georges Méliès, or Louis Feuillade had not come up against such a stark choice.

In order to explain the opportunities that were available to Dreyer, Bordwell offers a thorough account of the Danish film industry in the 1910s.

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[2] Even though there is no direct historical link between the New Critics and the Russian formalists, the former do echo some of the themes and preoccupations of the latter.

His approach defines the historical circumstances in terms of possibilities; by conceiving history in terms of a range of options, he aims to retain a sense of individual agency, of Dreyer's ability to decide how to act. Bordwell frames it like this: how did the choices Dreyer make respond to the constraints of the situation?

Notice that, by connecting Dreyer's choices directly with the conditions he confronted, Bordwell avoids a psychological account of Dreyer's career. In an effort to counter the illusion that the biographer has access to the artist's inner life, Bordwell emphasizes external reality, and makes practically no use of the standard tropes of family upbringing or religious beliefs to explain the work. What gives unity to the legend are external factors, the situation Dreyer faced, the possibilities he was presented with. In this sense, the legend, as conceived by Bordwell, is a piece of social history: it accords priority to large, "objective" forces over subjective motives.

Meanwhile, notice also that Bordwell here is strictly focused on the legend *as proposed by the artist*. To identify it, Bordwell looks at Dreyer's films, his interviews and writings, attempting to make them cohere into a philosophical stance, and paying special attention to those anecdotes and motifs Dreyer repeatedly brings up. It is the historian's task to connect this subjective legend with the objective situation, to explain why these particular tropes emerged at this precise moment in history. By quoting Dreyer, Bordwell strives to determine that the Danish director effectively saw the context in terms of film's status as art. Even if the occasions for Dreyer's articles, and for his films, varied, they are interpreted as contributing to the unity of the oeuvre.[3]

The historical framework acquires tremendous importance when Bordwell analyses questions of film style. In Bordwell's account, the primacy Dreyer accorded to the actor's face, to human expressivity, was his response

[3] "From almost the beginning of his career, [Dreyer] published essays setting forth his views on cinema. When his career lagged in the 1930s, he took up film reviewing. The specialized press interviewed him repeatedly during his career … This literary man – ex-journalist, scenarist – created a body of discourse that sought to define his artistic practice" (Bordwell 1981: 20-21)

to the larger problem presented to him, the problem of mass production versus art. For the Danish director, cinema's ability to capture the face is the marker of its artistic status. Conversely, this explains why Dreyer was relatively uninterested in aspects of mise-en-scène such as camera positioning, lighting, or editing:

> No wonder that Dreyer's scripts contain almost no shot breakdowns or notes as to camera positions. Henning Bendtsen, cinematographer for *Ordet* and *Gertrud*, recalls that only after having adjusted the sets and rehearsed the actors would Dreyer start to plan how the scene would be lit, shot, and cut. The primacy of the actor recruits other film techniques in the cause of human expressivity. (Bordwell 1981: 23)

Hence, a filmmaker's stylistic options are not arbitrary – not the lucky outpourings of a timeless genius – but can instead be fruitfully comprehended as responses to concrete historical problems. "The mystical quality of Dreyer's aesthetic is perfectly functional, solving a specific problem," Bordwell (1981: 23) contends. "Stylization and abstraction of lighting, décor, and performance can express what words and ratiocination cannot … The ineffable cannot be mass-produced."

By assuming a neat congruence between the legend Dreyer creates and the problems he confronts in particular historical circumstances, Bordwell seems to ascribe a large degree of rationality to the legend, leaving little room for the random, whimsical creation of biographical myth. The legend *must* mean something in terms of the problems of the era. In this view, tropes, myths, and even outright lies are important for the functions they perform, regardless of their factual accuracy. "Our task is not to puncture this legend," Bordwell (1981: 10) writes, "as if we could replace it with an easy truth, but rather to analyze the legend's historical and aesthetic functions." The tropes themselves are significant to the extent they respond to widely held social beliefs: for instance, when, in the early years of his career, Moretti proclaims

his "self-sufficiency", he is finding his own place within the Italian film industry, and also playing the trope of the young rebel to his own advantage.[4]

Bordwell seems to be quite confident in the possibility of objectively identifying the central elements of the historical context: he asserts that "Dreyer entered *an objectively constituted situation* in which economic, social, and aesthetic forces operated" (1981: 10 – emphasis mine). And yet his self-confidence in this regard makes a stark, intriguing contrast with his scepticism concerning the pursuit of biographical truth: notice the disdain implied in the previous quote, where he dismisses the very idea of correcting the erroneous elements in an artist's legend "with an *easy* truth" (my emphasis). Do Bordwell's reservations regarding biographical inquiry derive from epistemic concerns, or simply from Bordwell's own preference for explanations couched in terms of larger social forces? His monographs of individual directors are indeed framed against the project of what he calls "a historical poetics of cinema," which is, in a sense, the real focus of his intellectual endeavour. Singular features of a filmmaker's work are constantly referred back to their relationship to prevailing aesthetic norms, rather than understood in terms of individual idiosyncrasies. In a recent blog, he put it thus: "I'm interested in conventions – the conventional side of 'unconventional' works, and the unconventional side of more apparently rule-abiding ones" (Bordwell 2020).

In this respect, Bordwell's outlook seems perfectly consistent with T. S. Eliot's idea that individual artworks cannot be interpreted in isolation, but rather in terms of the history of an art form – what Eliot called "the tradition". The modernist poet and critic wrote:

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (Eliot 1934 [1913]: 15)

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[4] To be precise, the title of Moretti's first feature (*I Am An Autarkist*) proclaimed the (fictional) protagonist's self-sufficiency, but it was *taken* to refer to the director himself. This slippage of meaning benefited Moretti, in his own estimation. More on this in chapter 4, in the section titled "Actors versus characters".

"I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism," Eliot adds. Similarly, Bordwell's approach is focused on aesthetic elements: it is a historical *poetics*. This seems compatible in spirit with Eliot's goal of developing "an *impersonal* theory of poetry" (1934 [1913]: 18 – emphasis added) in which the author's idiosyncratic features barely matter: "I have tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written" (Eliot 1934 [1913]: 17).

What makes Bordwell's approach so appealing for my own research is precisely this ambition to couch the analysis of an artist's self-representation – salient in practically every Moretti film – within the larger historical context from which the films emerge. But the fact that Bordwell aims to combine the macro with the micro is, in itself, no guarantee that he does so successfully. To my mind, his understanding of the biographical legend raises important doubts. The scholar's aim is to objectively define the historical situation, *and also* to define the artist's subjective view of and response to it: in Dreyer's case, Bordwell sees cinema's status as art as the central question of the period, *and* asserts the Danish director also conceived his work in those terms. But is this a happy coincidence? It is unclear to me whether the congruence between the subjective legend and the historical context is something that needs to be empirically investigated, or whether it is presupposed. *Must* the legend mean something in terms of the historical context, or *may* it tell us something about it, while including many other, idiosyncratic features, hardly relevant beyond the individual artist?

Additionally, Bordwell is to my mind somewhat ambiguous as to whether the biographical legend is a subjective, autobiographical account provided by the artist (a matter of self-presentation), or an external fact, pertaining to how she is socially perceived. Finally, there is the – separate, but still related – question of truth: is the study of the legend to be pursued at the expense of biographical research, or are the two to be investigated concurrently? At first, Bordwell tended to brush the issue aside, but on this point his mind seems to have changed.

Who writes the legend?

While broadly following Tomaševskij's approach, Bordwell's definition of the legend introduces an important nuance. In his study of Dreyer, he writes:

> The biographical legend is a way in which authorship significantly shapes our perception of the work. Created by the filmmaker and other forces (the press, cinephiles), the biographical legend can determine how we "should" read the films and career. We do not come innocent to the films. (Bordwell 1981: 9)

Differently from Tomaševskij, Bordwell does not see the legend as being created solely by the artist. In his later study on Yasujiro Ozu (1903-63), the cinema scholar will explicitly add film studios as one of the forces that significantly shape an artist's biographical legend. In this respect, Bordwell's understanding of the legend closely parallels Genette's paratext: just as the latter is a joint creation of an author and a publisher, the former is the product of both artists and film studios.

However, Bordwell isn't always equally precise in defining the institutions that have the power to shape the legend. In the book on Dreyer, we see that he makes a vague nod to "the press, cinephiles" as other forces that impinge on the legend. This is especially problematic to the extent that, in the excerpt just quoted, Bordwell confers a large degree of authority to the legend, treating it as something able to impose itself upon the perception of spectators – he asserts the legend *determines* how we *should* approach the films – even if, at the same time, he oscillates between the dubitative and the definitive verb (the legend *can* determine), and qualifies his use of *should* with inverted commas. The question remains: should, or should we not, bow to the legend? How much autonomy do spectators have with regard to it? If the legend stems from multiple sources, can we still conceive of it as a unified, authoritative narrative? Genette seems to be more prudent in this respect, readily admitting that the impact of paratexts is never homogeneous, either across time or space, for readers are not forced to read prefaces, or interviews with authors, or to learn much about an author's biographical circumstances. In Genette's view, it is only critics who have a particular

obligation to engage with paratextual information – although, once they have considered it, they too are free to decide it is irrelevant.

Bordwell's expansion of the legend's sources raises a second issue. It no longer refers solely (as it did for Tomaševskij) to the artist's self-depiction in the text, but now includes various extratextual means (the press, publicity, etc.) by which the artist's *persona* is created and maintained. But, if the artist is not the sole creator of the legend, does she retain control over it? To an extent, this problem was already implicit in Tomaševskij, even if the Russian theorist clearly privileged the textual, authorial aspect. Tomaševskij had written that the artist "considers as a premise to his creations not his actual curriculum vitae, but his ideal biographical legend" (2002 [1923]: 52). If the legend is "a premise" for the artist's creations, this seems to imply it gains precedence over the actual works – a precedence which is not merely temporal, but possibly also causal. Even if we assume the legend to be initially the artist's own creation, it may after a certain point acquire a life of its own, so that its original creator is no longer its master. In his study on Ozu, Bordwell clearly veers in that direction, when he explicitly points out:

> The creation of a biographical legend should not be considered a cunningly contrived display: public discourse will necessarily appropriate a filmmaker's words and acts, turning them to particular ends. (1988: 6)

Ferrante's case, discussed earlier, is a perfect illustration of the dispute that may emerge between an author and other social forces over the mastery of a writer's biographical legend. The conflict between Ferrante and the journalist who unearthed (supposedly) biographical facts about her underscores the need for us, as researchers, to decide whether we are interested only in the realm of unrestrained literary self-creation, or if we care (as many readers presumably do) about the substantial link between the legend and the author's *actual* biography.

A third, related problem has to do with the distinction between the legend as such and those biographical facts which are not part of it – which are considered to be inconsequential for criticism. According to Tomaševskij,

only the legend, as it emerges from the literary works, is the proper object of study for the critic. We are not interested in the writer as such, but in a literary persona, constructed from the indications provided in the texts, as an artistic enterprise. The legend is a device used by some authors, and because of its literary effects it cannot be ignored. Tomaševskij was so keen on separating an interest in this literary creature (the legend) from an interest in factual biography that he went on to assert that "there are writers with biographies and writers without biographies" (2002 [1923]: 55).

My question, though, is whether such a clear-cut distinction can be maintained between artists whose life is relevant for the understanding of their work, and those whose life is inconsequential. Even when the artist does not directly provide a biographical legend, Tomaševskij admits there are cases in which the work may be said to "arouse" in the spectator a "desire to know":

> It would be inaccurate to say that [Alexander] Blok[5] put his life on display. Nonetheless, his poems did arouse an insurmountable desire to know about the author, and they made his readers avidly follow the various twists and turns of his life … The elements of intimate confession and biographical allusion in his poetry must be taken into account. (2002 [1923]: 54)

Tomaševskij seems to assume, in the case he alludes to, that the poet consciously *intended* to arouse the public's interest. But some writers – J. D. Salinger (1919-2010) and Thomas Pynchon (*b.* 1937) spring to mind – are *famously* reclusive; the wish to go undetected is arguably a central part of their legends. An artist who firmly hides from the public eye could be said to provoke the public's curiosity *precisely* because she hides: it seems difficult, these days, to think of any artist of some renown who does not have a legend at all, even if that legend revolves around the fact that they are inaccessible types. An authorial absence may *itself* slowly turn into a manifestation of authorial presence, the legend casting a shadow over the work thanks to the

[5] Alexander Blok (1880-1921), a Russian poet.

author's very inaccessibility.[6] Just like Ferrante, Salinger and Pynchon also take good care to spread misleading cues. Naturally, at the empirical level we will find artists whose biography may carry more explanatory power to the interpretation of the works than others: this will vary. At the theoretical level, though, the distinction between those artists who have relevant biographies (i.e., biographical legends) and those who do not is far from clear-cut. As Genette points out, pseudonyms and outright anonymity are two paratextual *strategies*, which may turn the question of authorship into an enigma, but which do not efface authorship as a category, that is, as a crucial paratextual element.

The French literary theorist furthermore notes that some pieces of biographical information (for instance an author's age, gender, or nationality) are inherently public, and therefore count as "factual" paratexts:

> By *factual* I mean the paratext that consists not of an explicit message (verbal or other) but of a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received. (Genette 1997 [1987]: 408-409)

The factual paratext comprises prizes and awards a work may have received, the author's overall oeuvre, and generic definitions, such as those which determine how a work is to be approached (for instance, as fiction or nonfiction). In light of these elements, it does not seem possible to trace a clear, sharp distinction (as Tomaševskij wished) between those aspects that rightfully belong in the legend and those facts that, being *merely* biographical, are of no artistic consequence. Certainly on a case-by-case basis we will have to decide which facts are relevant or trivial; but is it possible to determine *from the outset*, as Tomaševskij purports to do, which biographical facts matter and which ones do not? What is more: should this decision rest with the author? In the previous chapter, I have already shown the complications Wimsatt and Beardsley encountered when they attempted to

[6] As Merve Emre observes in relation to Ferrante, "It is not clear when her abstention turned into anonymity, or when that anonymity acquired its peculiar aura, but it might have been in the mid-1990s, when she began to correspond with journalists, answering their questions about her life, always with the caveat that her answers might be lies" (2020: 212).

make clear-cut demarcations between types of relevant and irrelevant biographical information.

Closely following on Tomaševskij's footsteps, Bordwell's early conceptualization appeared to be exceedingly respectful of the legend as proposed by the artist, to the detriment of investigating actual biographical truth. In his later study on Ozu, on the contrary, Bordwell explicitly questions the legend:

> Analyzing Ozu's poetics of cinema … requires us to qualify and contextualize the biographical legend, discounting it when it runs afoul of other evidence while still preserving it as a precious clue to the diverse aesthetic and political roles the work could fulfil. (1988: 7)

In fact, the thrust of Bordwell's effort, at this later stage, is emphatically *de*mythologizing: where the legend presents itself as static (a portrait of the artist's "personality"), Bordwell wants to reveal the specific functions it fulfils; where the legend presents itself in ahistorical or anachronistic terms, Bordwell shows it to be a dynamic response to context. His outlook is decisively historical.

Earlier, I have noted Bordwell's antipathy towards biographism, that is, his rejection of the attempt to account for an artwork in terms of the artist's personal life. Bordwell forcefully rejects the temptation to read elements of a filmmaker's life directly into the films for – he points out – such interpretations often mask their own arbitrariness. One can be tempted, Bordwell suggests, to trace the theme of family disintegration running through so many of Ozu's films back to the circumstances of the Japanese director's own childhood: "a home governed by a doting mother and lacking a busy father – [these would be] the origins of the breakdown of family unity which many critics take to be at the center of his work" (1988: 5). And yet, with equal plausibility, one could imagine the same themes resulting from the very opposite set of biographical circumstances. "His depiction of the family could just as easily have come from a blissfully happy childhood. (His films would then be depicting the family disunity he most feared)" (Bordwell

1988: 5). Bordwell's case is pointed: if, by selectively appropriating a few biographical facts, we can explain everything and its exact opposite, then such facts explain very little indeed. But his example underscores the need for sound, rigorous biographical hypotheses; it does not disqualify biographical explanations as such.

The ultimate source of Bordwell's antipathy towards biographism seems to be his wariness about isolating artists from the social and historical context. I have already pointed out that, even when conducting in-depth studies of individual directors, the film scholar's analysis is filtered through what he calls a "historical poetics of cinema." For Bordwell, one can hardly comprehend an artist's choices unless one considers the range of options available to her at a particular moment. Bordwell's historical poetics aims to identify the stylistic norms prevalent in a given historical context, so as to understand how and why the individual filmmaker adhered to some norms, and departed from others.

> The poetics of cinema which I am proposing differs from an "intrinsic" critical theory in assuming that only against historically significant backgrounds do particular works achieve salience, for audiences or analysts … For a filmmaker, the pertinent backgrounds are at least two: the mode of film production and consumption within which s/he works; and the formal norms that come to hand. (Bordwell 1988: 17)

Bordwell's ambition is to create a bridge between the artist's individual agency and the social constraints she faces. Even when he studies individual directors, it is to these external elements, which are susceptible of generalization, that Bordwell devotes the bulk of his attention. From this standpoint, biographical data are irrelevant, if not outright misleading: "Even if we could strike a mother lode of such data, we should be no closer to understand the aesthetic and cultural causes, functions, and consequences of Ozu's work", Bordwell (1988: 5) asserts. To write the legend is to tell a particular *kind* of story, and the narrative account Bordwell wants to establish is neither individualistic nor pre-eminently psychological.

Through life, any individual artist encounters many and varied situations which the legend attempts to bring together into a coherent narrative. As with any narrative, such coherence is often dependent on leaps and omissions, and therefore may be said to have an illusory aspect. It is this narrative Bordwell aims to put in context, trying to make out how it responds to the historical situation: rather than worrying about the legend's intrinsic reliability, he is interested in the way it functions. If Bordwell happens to research biographical facts, it is not in order to correct the legend, much less to denounce it as false, but in order to better understand it. The places where the legend departs from historical fact – the gaps, the distortions, even outright lies – may be the most telling. Biography as such is of little interest to him.

Distinctions between types of paratext

As we have seen, Genette's notion of paratext expresses the observation that practically all printed texts are accompanied by peripheral information that impacts on the way they are read. But the literary theorist's crucial originality arguably resides, not so much in this general idea, but in the subtle and detailed attention he pays to the paratext's many forms. While the forms of the paratext vary according to different historical periods, cultures, and literary genres, Genette notes that the inexistence of any kind of paratextual information to accompany a literary text is very rare; hence, rather than thinking (as Tomaševskij did) in terms of an artist having or not having a legend, the French theorist urges us to be alert to a variety of paratextual strategies.

Genette makes an essential, first subdivision between *peritext* and *epitext*. The peritext is physically located within the book, and it includes titles, pseudonyms, epigraphs, prefaces, afterwords, etc. The epitext, on the other hand, takes the form of external commentaries, which may be public (e.g., interviews, texts about the work) or private (as in letters, diaries, and

the like).[7] In passing, Genette explicitly cites two specifically cinematic forms of the paratext: a film's credits and its trailer (1997 [1987]: 407). I think the former would count as peritext, and the latter as epitext.

Another important distinction is the one Genette makes according to timing: there are *prior* paratexts (e.g., an interview with an author speaking about a forthcoming book, or a filmmaker about her next film), *original* paratexts (those that accompany the initial publication, in the form of a preface, title, etc.), and *later* paratexts (for instance, an author's retrospective commentaries on her work). Later paratexts are furthermore subdivided into those that emerge a little after the work itself was published, perhaps within a few months (these are "later" paratexts proper), and those that emerge much later, for instance in anniversary editions of an important book or film (these are "delayed" paratexts). In the context of the debates on authorial intention – to which I will devote my full attention in the second half of this chapter – Jerrold Levinson (2016: 161) makes a similar contrast between types of authorial commentary depending on whether these belong in the same "pragmatic situation" as the work: if they do, Levinson believes they carry added weight. The American philosopher does not give us a detailed account of why it should be so, but by the light of Genette's distinction one could hypothesize that the temporal dimension allows us to distinguish between those extratextual elements that effectively impact the reception of a work from other, more peripheral or arcane trivia about the work or its author.

Genette's differentiation of paratexts according to their timing furthermore makes plain that paratexts can change, either by the wilful decision of an author or publisher – who may for instance exclude an earlier preface from a later edition of a book, or conversely introduce a new one – or as a consequence of the mere passing of time. The transformation of the

[7] The epitext is formed by "messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversation) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others)" (Genette 1997 [1987]: 5).

paratext is one of the reasons why the interpretation of literary texts also tends to change over time.

While Genette allows for readers to have various levels of engagement with paratexts, he believes critics have an obligation to engage with them, at least in their most important forms. Counting manifestations of authorial intention as a decisive form of paratextual information, Genette argues that the critic does not need to endorse authors' opinions about their own work, but she has to acknowledge their existence:

> Valid or not, the author's viewpoint is part of the paratextual performance, sustains it, inspires it, anchors it … The critic is by no means bound to subscribe to that viewpoint. I maintain only that, knowing it, he cannot completely disregard it, and if he wants to contradict it he must first assimilate it. (Genette 1997 [1987]: 408-409)

Genette's position on this issue – the author's views are relevant but not binding – seems to my mind eminently sensible; what Genette lacks is a fully elaborated view on *why*, and in what cases, manifestations of authorial intent cast light on the work. Such problems have been intensely debated by philosophers working on authorial intention, and I will try to articulate my own position on such issues below.

While the concept of the paratext aims to be more specific than merely admitting the importance of contextual information for making sense of a literary text, Genette's category of "factual paratexts" denotes the difficulties in raising a strict boundary between context and paratext. At a minimum, if the factual paratext can be brought to the public's attention independently of the author's wishes, then it crucially differs from Genette's initial definition of the paratext in terms of the author's intention. The French literary theorist goes so far as to admit that "in principle, every context serves as paratext" (1997 [1987]: 8). He writes:

> The existence of these facts [such as the author's age, gender, etc.] does not always need to be mentioned to be a matter of "common knowledge". For example, most readers of *A la recherche du temps perdu* are aware of the two biographical facts of Proust's part-Jewish ancestry and his homosexuality … I

> am not saying that people must know these facts; I am saying only that people who do know them read Proust's work differently from people who do not. (1997 [1987]: 8)

Genette's claim here is exceedingly vague: certainly each person reads a literary work in her own personal way – it is her *reading* – and that varies depending on the information the reader possesses, as well as on said reader's particular mindset and life experiences. The assertion that "most readers" know these things about Proust is most certainly not meant to be taken as an empirical claim, and it would be petty to quarrel with it on such grounds. What Genette fails to tell us is whether critics *should* or *should not* interpret the text by the light of this biographical information. If every context may become a paratext, by what standard are we to ascertain whether a particular contextual piece of information does indeed perform relevant paratextual functions?

Furthermore, Genette also does not clarify whether a piece of information needs to be accurate in order for it to play paratextual functions. When there is a contradiction between an author's stated age, gender, or nationality, for instance, and the actual truth, should the critic stick to the purported or to the real fact? A crucial element in the controversy about Ferrante's identity is whether the author has – as she claims – first-hand knowledge of the world she describes in her novels. Which one counts as the relevant paratext: the author's purported identity, or the actual facts about her life? Again, this is the same dilemma we encountered earlier, when faced with the "legendary" aspects of an artist's biography. If factual paratexts can interfere with the way the text will be read, regardless of what the author (or publisher) intends to make public, it seems that Genette's concept does not abide by the same logic as Tomaševskij's version of the biographical legend: the Russian formalist was interested in biography only as a form of literary self-creation. Therefore, if Genette is similarly indifferent to the question of the paratext's truth, it cannot be on the same grounds.

Woody Allen's work, which I will discuss in significant detail in the next chapter, may be used to illustrate what is at stake in setting the

paratext apart from the general context. If we were to define the paratext strictly in terms of the author's intention – as Genette seems initially to do – then the only paratextual piece of information about the filmmaker's circumstances we would have to attend to when trying to make sense of his 1992 film *Husbands and Wives* (for instance) would be the director's statement, at the time of the film's release, that what happens in his films and in his life are completely separate matters. However, if we admit that some facts perform paratextual functions in virtue of their mere existence, irrespective of the author's wishes and views, then the biographical circumstances we would need to take into consideration when interpreting *Husbands and Wives* are much, much wider. The fact that this contextual information may be very prominent at one point and altogether fade into oblivion at a later stage is something Genette's concept of the paratext makes room for. Even if we admit that elements pertaining to Allen's biography are indeed relevant to the interpretation of *Husbands and Wives*, the level of detail and the quality of this information is bound to change over time.[8]

In my view – as I will try to argue more fully in the next chapter – biographical information can be, and often is, relevant to the interpretation of artworks. The pertinence of the biographical angle needs to be assessed independently from the author's opinions on the matter. One of the risks in treating authorial manifestations of intention as just another form of "paratext", as Genette does, is the conflation of discussions that raise distinct problems. I will therefore devote the remainder of this chapter to authorial intention, and in the next chapter I will consider the relevance of biographical information (a form of "factual" paratext) to the assessment of artworks. The attempt to restrict the biographical evidence that is pertinent to the appreciation of an artwork according to the author's willingness to convey such evidence (as Tomaševskij emphatically proposes) is to my mind

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[8] Again, if we were to follow Levinson's suggestion that the relevance of extratextual elements depends on whether these are part of the same pragmatic situation in which the artwork was issued, then only biographical elements pertaining to Allen at the time of the release of *Husbands and Wives* could be relevant to the appreciation of the film, but not so similar information about the author and his life at a later period. This distinction strikes me as insufficiently motivated, as I hope to show in the next chapter.

unconvincing. Since the relevance of extratextual information to the appreciation of artworks is a distinct matter from the issue of authorial intentions, the two are best considered separately.

Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis

In Tomaševskij's version, the legend is primarily a literary device, an image of the author as it emerges from the text; in Bordwell's, it refers to the way the artist is socially represented, not just in the artwork, but also in the media, in publicity, and so forth. In both versions, it is a theoretical construct, hence a "legend" and not actual biography. Both authors make clear their relative lack of interest in the investigation of biographical truth (although Bordwell wavers on this issue). In recent debates on authorial intention, Levinson has articulated a similar position, one which prefers the construction of a "best hypothesis" about authorial intention over the actual intention as such.

On the surface, such a preference seems paradoxical. If the hypothesis is a *means* for assessing an intention, why should we favour it even when faced with the actual thing? Like Barthes (and like Wimsatt and Beardsley before him), Levinson draws a radical separation between communication of a practical sort and the artistic kind. In everyday communication, we are typically more interested in what a person is *trying* to say, rather than in what she *actually* puts into words; therefore, when we are unsure about what a person meant, we ask her to rephrase. In the day-to-day, we care first and foremost about "utterer's meaning". In the interpretation of art, however, we have a specific interest in the object, separately from and above the thoughts of the person who created it.[9] The artwork isn't merely the medium for conveying a message: form is of specific relevance, and therefore we attend primarily to "*utterance* meaning". "In literary contexts, unlike conversational

[9] "When a poet vouchsafes us, in plain language, what some enigmatic poem of his might mean, we don't react by then discarding the poem in favor of the offered précis. In ordinary verbal intercourse, what a person meant takes precedence over, or overrides, what the person's language as uttered may end up meaning for a suitably grounded interlocutor; this seems not clearly so in the sphere of literary production" (Levinson 1996: 177).

ones, we have a prior and independent interest in utterance meaning *entirely apart from* whatever meaning may stand behind … that utterance meaning as constituted" (Levinson 2002: 317-318 – emphasis in the original).

Now, while authorial intentions can certainly illuminate our understanding of an artwork (they may cast light on *utterance* meaning), intentions cannot be mistaken for the meaning as such. The distinction between utterer's meaning (i.e., intended meaning) and utterance meaning (i.e., the meaning of the art object as it concretely exists) must not be collapsed:

> Utterance meaning is logically distinct from utterer's meaning, while at the same time necessarily related to it conceptually: we arrive at utterance meaning by *aiming* at utterer's meaning in the most comprehensive and informed manner we can muster. (Levinson 1996: 178 – emphasis in the original)[10]

In Levinson's estimation, *actual* intentionalism drops this crucial distinction, and it is for this reason that his preferred brand of intentionalism is "hypothetical".

How does this translate into practice? If what we are interested in tracking down is the meaning of the art object (not the intention beneath it), then according to Levinson only *public* evidence related to authorial intention should count; otherwise, we would not be tracking utterance meaning (which exists in public), but meaning as secretly residing in the mind of the author. This methodological restriction bars the critic's access to private papers, personal confessions, and the like. Although it may seem somewhat arbitrary in its remit, this stricture is meant to serve the purpose of treating the artwork as distinct from the intention that gives rise to it.

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[10] The term "utterance" is meant to convey the idea that the meaning of a text cannot be grasped merely by applying to it the relevant set of linguistic rules, but rather requires reference to the context in which such text was issued. This distinction between "utterance meaning" and "utterer's meaning" indicates Levinson's (avowed) debt to William E. Tolhurst. "A text cannot be viewed as a mere sequence of words whose meaning and identity are solely a function of a set of linguistic rules; … a text must be viewed as an utterance whose meaning and identity are defined in part by the context in which it has been produced" (Tolhurst 1979: 3).

Paradoxically, Levinson's hypotheses about intention are conceived in terms not of a work's origin, but of its destination: it is not the authors but the *recipients* who arrive at what Levinson defines as an "optimal construction of authorial intention from the viewpoint of an ideal reader" (1996: 200).[11] While the intention is the author's, it is constructed from the standpoint of the reader:

> What an utterance means is a matter, roughly, of *what an appropriate hearer would most reasonably take* a speaker to be trying to convey in employing a given verbal vehicle in the given communicative context. (Levinson 2002: 309 – emphasis in the original)

This reader (or hearer, or spectator) is defined as "appropriate" or "ideal" to denote that it cannot be understood in statistical terms: it is not a matter of assessing what a majority of people took the work to mean. The ideal audience also need not coincide with the one the author concretely had in mind in producing the artwork: other individuals, much beyond the author's imagination, may come into a productive encounter with the work. Instead, the "ideal audience" is constituted by anyone that is sufficiently attuned to the "historical, cultural, and authorial" context in which the work emerged (2002: 313). What matters, for Levinson, is not what the author *concretely* intended, but what an appropriate hearer would be most *justified to believe* they intended. Hypothetical intentionalism therefore concerns itself with constructing a best hypothesis, inferred from the position of an appropriate audience:

> The "best" hypothesis by hypothetical intentionalist lights is that which we would have most reason to accept or adopt given the totality of evidence that is both available *and admissible*, that is, the totality of what is derivable from the text and its *legitimately invoked* surrounding context. (Levinson 2002: 314-315 – emphasis added)

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[11] Levinson closely follows Tolhurst here: "Utterance meaning is best understood as the intention which a member of the intended audience would be most justified in attributing to the author based on the knowledge and attitudes which he possesses in virtue of being a member of the intended audience" (Tolhurst 1979: 11).

Since the meaning is hypothesized from the standpoint of the audience, only information that is available to such audience is legitimate material in the building the hypothesis, and that is why only public evidence can count. Levinson follows in the footsteps of William Tolhurst, who put the point thus:

> Sometimes the intended audience will have quite a lot of information about the utterer and sometimes not. Since utterance meaning is that hypothesis which is best supported by the knowledge which the intended audience possesses qua intended audience, wherever such information (of the author) is necessary for a determination of utterance meaning, it will be public in the sense that it is shared by both the utterer and his audience. (1979: 13)

According to this view, personal aspects about an author may legitimately count into the interpretation of an artwork, so long as such personal aspects are a matter of public knowledge. To illustrate this precept with the case of Woody Allen, to which I will devote significant attention in the next chapter, it may be fair for Richard Brody, the film critic for *The New Yorker*, to make inferences about what goes on in the pictures by the light of what he knows about the filmmaker's life, so long as this information is public, and therefore the reading is accountable to other spectators.[12]

To an extent, the preoccupations hypothetical intentionalism attends to here are similar to those Wimsatt and Beardsley had expressed. While disavowing the "private" meanings of literary texts, the New Critics acknowledged the need to contemplate "semiprivate" ones, which they defined as meanings attached to words by the author or by some particular social group of which the latter was a member. Those meanings were not exactly *internal* to the text, but they weren't outside the remit of literary interpretation either, for they were not, strictly speaking, private. As I signalled in the previous chapter, this admission created a grey area in which Wimsatt and Beardsley essentially gave us no reliable guide to tell apart, except on a casuistic, potentially arbitrary way, those shades of semiprivate evidence that could, in their view, illuminate the meaning of a text, from

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[12] See the section titled "Biographical criticism and the passing of moral judgement", in chapter 3.

those that should be excluded from our analysis because they were merely personal information about the author. Wimsatt and Beardsley's supposed typology of evidence seemed in the end to come down to a mere plea for the critic's common sense – which may not be a bad thing in practice, but it does compromise their position as a theoretical stance.

Hypothetical intentionalists, for their part, admit a range of evidence that is both wider and more precisely defined than that of the New Critics. Tolhurst writes:

> So far as literature is concerned, since the author is usually addressing a group of people who cannot be supposed to have a detailed knowledge of his (the author's) psyche (at least not before reading his work), such knowledge would not in general seem to be required for literary interpretation. But it may well be necessary to have a good deal of knowledge of the historical context in which the work was written. (1979: 13)

Levinson outlines the types of information which may be relevant, which encompass from the purely linguistic (application of the relevant codes, e.g. the language of the text), to the artistic tradition against which the work sets itself (the art form, genre, and problematic), the author's overall oeuvre, aspects of the artist's biography (so long as these are publicly available), the artist's predecessors, and even essentially social elements about the context in which the text emerged, such as the artist's time, place, and social climate (1995: 188). Generally speaking, this coincides with the approach I follow when trying to make sense of Moretti's oeuvre, in Part Two of the present dissertation. With his strong appeal to the historical framework, Levinson's position closely echoes Bordwell's. On the other hand, when it comes to biographical research as such, Levinson strikes a rhetorically dismissive note which also echoes Bordwell's lack of interest in explanations couched in an individual's particular features:

> The goal of literary interpretation … is not to discover, for its own sake, the author's intention in writing the text, as if criticism were at base a matter of detective investigation, but to get at the *utterance meaning* of the text, that is, what *it – not the author* – is saying, in its author-specific context … Thus, even when [utterer's intent] is available, it does not displace [utterance

> meaning] as the object of literary interpretation – as opposed to biographical sleuthing. (Levinson 2002: 315 – emphases in the original)

One of the objections I had raised with regards to the biographical legend was to the notion that we could neatly separate what belongs in it because it is public (and is therefore pertinent for the task of interpretation) and that which is "merely" biographical, hence irrelevant. A similar problem afflicts Levinson's hypothetical intentionalism: do we have a safe criterion for determining what counts as public evidence? Papers that once were private may later become public – does the very *meaning* of an artwork change when new information comes to light?

Levinson openly admits that the distinction is "blurry".[13] However, he is not easily willing to let go of it, because, in his view, the price of admitting *all* evidence about authorial intentions would be to conflate the meaning of the artwork with the artist's intention, that is, to replace the proper object of interpretation by an extratextual, possibly clearer rendering of what the author supposedly meant. Over the years, Levinson has made various attempts at improving on his own definition of types of admissible evidence. In a 2002 article, he suggested that, besides what already belongs in public knowledge about the author's identity and about the oeuvre, only the things the artist would want to be known about herself should be taken into account:

> One might begin to refine the concept of a work's appreciatively relevant public context by focusing on the idea of what the author *wanted* readers to know about the circumstances of a work's creation … At any rate, such a thing obviously will not fluctuate with the contingencies of actual publication of the information in question. (Levinson 2002: 317 – emphasis in the original)

This criterion sounds remarkably similar to Jeanette Winterson's argument, cited in the previous chapter, that information about the biographical author behind the penname Elena Ferrante should not count

[13] In his view, "that the distinction, however reconstructed, might remain blurry is not fatal to its utility. We expect borderline cases for any difficult distinction, but the existence of such cases does not preclude a preponderance of clear-cut cases on either side" (Levinson 2002: 317).

into our appreciation of the novels because said author did not wish it to count; that was, after all, the very reason why the actual author who wrote Ferrante's novels decided to pick an alias. It also brings to mind Genette's initial definition of the paratext in terms of the author's intention: the French theorist was primarily concerned with the way writers (and publishers) have the power to frame a literary work. However, if we admit that biographical information about an author may have something of value to tell us about the meaning of a work, it seems reasonable to assume that biographical research – if conducted properly – will bring to light a number of facts the author herself had not divulged, and quite possibly did not wish it to be divulged. In the case of deceased authors, we might have no way of telling whether the author would have consented to such facts becoming public, and in any event the notion that only "authorized" biographies should be of relevance to artistic interpretation is clearly unsustainable. As I argued before, while not all biographical facts will be of relevance to art interpretation, it is difficult to declare at the outset which ones will be irrelevant. Even if we were to accept – as Tomaševskij and Bordwell prefer – that our primary focus should be the artist as it exists in the public mind, there would be no way of finding it out without going into the artist's actual biography: what counts for the public, after all, is what it believes to be *true* about the artist's biography.

More recently, as I have mentioned above, Levinson has suggested that the discrimination between types of relevant evidence should be grounded on whether authorial statements were part of "the pragmatic situation" to which the artwork originally belonged. Levinson notes that "statements of semantic intent, *normally subsequent to the work's offering*, are not elements of the pragmatic situation in which the text was uttered" (2016: 161 – emphasis added). Additionally, this echoes Genette's differentiation of paratexts according to their timing, as I have pointed out. However, it is important to bear in mind that the French theorist's distinction was not meant to stipulate – at the outset and in general – what kinds of paratexts should carry more weight for interpretation. Genette was describing types of paratext, not classifying them in terms of their possible interpretative pertinence.

Levinson's elaboration on this issue is somewhat pithy: we do not have the benefit of a detailed explanation, on his part, of why it should decisively matter whether an authorial statement was made *prior* or *subsequently* to an artwork, of why this should serve as a general criterion for determining the relevance of authorial comments. In the next chapter, for instance, we will see that Richard Brody reads several of Allen's films as "anticipatory confessions" of acts the New York filmmaker later on performed (or so Brody believes) in his actual life.[14] We do not need to accept the particulars of the critic's interpretation of the artworks (or of the biographical facts) to see that such a thing could potentially occur – that is, that acts practised by an artist at a later point in life could conceivably cast retrospective light upon works such an author had produced earlier. Similarly, when I read Moretti's films by the light of the director's statements, I do not take the timing of such statements to be an important criterion for assessing their validity. The filmmaker may be more open when discussing aspects of his early works later on, rather than at the time of the film's release; at least there is no reason to think this could not happen.[15]

The central criterion, in Levinson's later version, is not so much whether the evidence is "internal" or "external" to the work itself; and it is also not exactly whether such statements of intention are of a "public" or a "private" nature. The point, now, is whether such evidence belongs to the relevant pragmatic context.[16] It therefore no longer relies upon the possibility of clearly demarcating public evidence from the private kind (on which both Tomaševskij's and Bordwell's versions of the legend depended). It is also preferable to Levinson's earlier suggestion that the criterion be determined

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[14] See the section titled "Biographical criticism and the passing of moral judgment", in chapter 3.

[15] In chapter 4, for instance, I dwell in detail on the possible meanings of the title of Moretti's second feature film, *Ecce bombo* (1978), taking into consideration, amongst other things, the statements the director himself has made about the issue. To my mind, Moretti's later statements, made a full two decades after the film's initial release, are more informative than the ones he made earlier. I see no reason for overlooking them on account of their tardiness. See the section titled "An absurdist title", in chapter 4.

[16] "The crucial issue… is thus not so much whether a given fact is private or public … but rather what can and cannot legitimately figure in the *background context* for interpreting such an utterance as an utterance. The point is actually about utterances in general, whether artistic or ordinary" (Levinson 2016: 162 – emphasis in the original). The latter sentence is intriguing, as it seems to imply Levinson is ready to let go of the distinction between day-to-day statements and the artistic kind.

by whatever the author herself wanted (or rather did not want) to count into the appreciation of the work. However, this new position seems to imply that the very *meaning* of an artwork can change when evidence that had previously been known only by a few people comes into public light, for then such elements become part of the "pragmatic context of the utterance". The author, as we *construct* it, changes.

However: if we *a priori* restrict the kinds of evidence we find permissible, are we still trying to track down the actual author's intentions, or are we trying to track down the most sensible, reasonable, well-grounded hypothesis *which is based on a certain set of data*? Do we want to know what the author was actually thinking, or just what the author *as a public figure* (as a construct) may be imagined to be thinking? Levinson protests he does not deal in hypothetical authors, but rather builds hypotheses about actual authors' intentions:

> The view I defend is not that the interpreter's task is to hypothesize *an author*, and subsequently, what such a *hypothetical* agent might have intended, but rather to hypothesize … about the *actual author*, seeking to arrive at what that author is most plausibly and charitably understood as meaning via the text … [My] version of [hypothetical intentionalism] does not involve *hypothetical authors*, and thus is not subject to any qualms one might have about hypothetical entities generally. (Levinson 2016: 148 – emphasis in the original)

To my mind, his claims on this point are unconvincing. By restricting our access to some kinds of evidence, we indeed postulate an idealized construct, which may not exactly match the flesh and bone human being who concretely created a work. It might be preferable, in this case, to stick to Tomaševskij's and Bordwell's frank admission that what we were dealing with were "legends", not real persons. Levinson furthermore admits to an affinity between this construct and Wayne Booth's concept of an "implied author", but he adds that while the latter refers to an authorial spectre that emerges from the act of reading (with only general information about the

historical period the text comes from, the genre, and the language of the work), his own version is "thicker" in contextual terms.

The problem with any authorial spectre, however "thickly" hypothesized, is that it gives rise to a logical quandary: the construct, surmised from the audience's standpoint (that is, at the point of reception), cannot itself be responsible for the meanings that the reader or spectator encounters in an artwork.[17] Certainly, a critic who is indifferent to authorial intention (e.g., Barthes) is entitled to build whatever interpretative context they like, against which some features of the work may resonate. In that case, as Paisley Livingston puts it, "the question is not what ideas the film-maker(s) did or did not have in mind or express in a film; the point, rather, is that certain aspects of a film can be helpful in *illustrating* or bringing to mind philosophical problems or positions" (2009: 58 – emphasis in the original). But that is not the position a hypothetical intentionalist like Levinson purports to defend. If we are after the ideas the actual author expressed (as Levinson professes to be), then we will have to reconstruct the real intentions wherever they may be hiding. A formal definition (such as Levinson's), which excludes certain kinds of evidence even when they may provide us access to the truth, will not do: if it's the actual intention that we are after, then on occasion there may be no alternative to sleuthing.

Furthermore, the fact that it is so difficult to find an adequate name to designate Levinson's position may signal a crucial ambiguity in the philosophical stance itself. To call it "hypothetical *intentionalism*" is paradoxical, since Levinson also states his views are strictly neither a brand of intentionalism nor of anti-intentionalism (1996: 175). Alluding to the ideological overtones debates about interpretation have acquired over the past 50 years or so, he goes on to say his is "a 'leftist' version of intentionalism", or a "far-rightist" form of anti-intentionalism (1996: 204). This is most likely a joke – or, at least, I find it funny. Still, this facetious

[17] I have alluded to this problem in the previous chapter: "Author surrogate theories" – of which hypothetical intentionalism is arguably an example – "are circular," C. Paul Sellors argues. "The author surrogate is itself an interpretation and cannot therefore be responsible for or prompt that interpretation" (2010: 56).

labelling suggests Levinson sees himself as closer to intentionalism (merely to its left) than to anti-intentionalism (to which he is on the "far-right"). All the while, very recently he again insisted his own position is "ultimately a form of non-intentionalism" (2016: 6). Strictly *anti*-intentionalist he is not, for the very use of the term "utterance" indicates that the meaning of a text cannot be ascertained simply by reference to a sequence of words, but it requires acknowledgement of the relevant context, which crucially includes the text's author.[18] The challenge of interpretation lies in constituting from "brute" texts (or sound-and-image sequences) artworks "with specific meanings and qualities rooted in their authors' identities and life worlds," in Levinson's terms (1996: 195).[19] We don't treat artworks in the way we would treat a random combination of sentences or a random sequence of images, because we postulate a communicative agent behind the work.[20]

The dilemma Levinson finds himself facing is one I sympathize with: we want to track down authors – actual, fully embodied human beings – to inform our understanding of artworks, but we do not want to go so far as to give them final authority over what the works mean. "Actual intentionalism … gives just a little too much to authors as persons," Levinson contends (1996: 199); in a different piece, he adds that "to say that the actual author is the *object* targeted by such interpretive hypotheses is not to say that the actual author is to be *consulted* in evaluating such hypotheses" (2016: 148 – emphasis in the original). In his view, the artist is generally not in the best position to discern the artwork's meaning.[21] His standpoint is furthermore shared by Moretti himself, as I've signalled in chapter 1: the director readily

[18] "Utterance meaning is in part determined by the meaning of the word sequence uttered and in part by the context of discourse in which it was uttered, a context which may well include the author's intention" (Tolhurst 1979: 4).

[19] Barthes called attention to this problem too, when he pointed out that the words we encounter on the page are not themselves enough to constitute *a text* (see chapter 1). He was correct in the diagnosis, but from it he proceeded to elaborate what Levinson calls "ludic" readings, i.e., ones that are radically indifferent to the question of truthful interpretation.

[20] "It is crucial to the task of interpretation that the sentences of a literary text be presumed to issue from *a single mind*, to have a purpose, and to be the vehicle of a specific act of communication, widely construed. We don't treat literary texts the way we would treat random collections of sentences" (Levinson 1996: 177 – emphasis added). The assumption about "a single mind" is questionable: surely works can be jointly authored.

[21] "Authors, because of their unique perspectives on their own work, are generally very far from being ideal readers of them" (Levinson 2002: 316).

admits he does not have enough distance from his own films to be able to provide the most perceptive reading of them.[22] Levinson furthermore claims – reasonably, to my mind – that his approach "squares better with the sort of responsible interpretive freedom that it seems most important to preserve about the critical enterprise and about the engagement of readers with literary works" (2016: 157).

Actual intentionalism and the meshing condition

Most of the current versions of *actual* (as opposed to Levinson's hypothetical) intentionalism purportedly include a refutationist element, in Karl Popper's sense: in order for a hypothesis about the meaning of an artwork to be taken seriously, it must establish the conditions under which it could be *disproved*.[23] The point – these authors argue – is not to replace the analysis of films with the analysis of intentions, but rather to combine intra- and extra-textual information, so as to understand what is in the artwork through the prism of what can be asserted about authors' purposes. When the artist fails to realize in the work what she was trying to achieve, analysis of what she wanted to express cannot substitute for analysis of what she did express. While in many cases authorial intentions are successfully achieved, there are also instances where an author fails to get her point across.[24] Art interpretation must take into account internal ("textual") and external (contextual) evidence. Here is Paisley Livingston, specifically on the cinema:

> Support for an interpretative option may derive from both internal and external evidence, where "internal" refers to the meaningful features of the audio-visual display, and "external" refers to the evidence pertaining to the

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[22] I have quoted Moretti to this effect in the introduction to the previous chapter: "I think people often understand things about my films that I am completely oblivious to. I don't say this out of modesty. It's just that I am so involved with the movies that it's impossible for me to be truly clear-sighted about them."

[23] Karl Popper (1902-1994) was one of the most important names in the philosophy of science in the twentieth century, with relevant (and not unrelated) work also in the field of political philosophy. Famously, for Popper, Marxism and Freudism were non-falsifiable theories, and hence unacceptable as scientific hypotheses.

[24] This is meant to placate the concerns classically expressed by Wimsatt and Beardsley, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. See the section titled "The intentional fallacy", in chapter 1.

> context in which the film was made and what we can learn about the author and his intentions. (2009: 108)

There is, in Livingston's terms, a "meshing condition" to be satisfied in comparing authorial intentions with features of an artwork: the two must be congruent. This brand of intentionalism defines itself as "partial" (or "modest", in Noël Carroll's terms) to the extent that authorial intentions can fail. But the meshing condition has a flip side: when the meanings we attribute to an artwork are incompatible with what can be safely established about the author's intentions, then our interpretation is *wrong*. The meshing has to be allowed to fail *on both sides*. Hence, if the author's stated intentions are congruent with one of the potential meanings of a sentence or an artwork, then the author's stated meaning is *the* correct interpretation. Carroll explains:

> The intentions of authors that the modest actual intentionalist takes seriously are only the intentions of the author that the linguistic/literary unit can support (given the conventions of language and literature). But where the linguistic unit can support more than one possible meaning, the modest actual intentionalist maintains that the correct interpretation is the one that is compatible with the author's actual intention … The author's intention … must square with what [the author] has written, but if it squares with what he has written, then the author's intention is authoritative. (2000: 76-77)

According to *actual* intentionalists, in order to determine whether intentions have been successfully realized, we compare them with the artwork's actual features. But that means we need to be able to assess "internal" evidence separately from what we know the author was trying to do, for the *refutability* of the intention (the possibility that it may fail) depends on that. This raises a problem, for – by Livingston's own admission – we can never assess internal evidence about an artwork in complete independence from the framework we bring into interpreting it. Livingston himself insists that our experience of a film is never simply what we see on the screen and hear through the loudspeakers: assessment of "internal" elements requires the application of the relevant background information.

Interpretation of the internal evidence is always dependent on what we expect to find.[25] Therefore, in order to establish work meaning, we create *hypotheses*, which – in the intentionalists' view – must take into account, amongst other things, what the author was presumably trying to do. Levinson detects an element of circularity at work in this reasoning:

> For actual intentionalism, only "successfully realized" [intentions] can serve as a criterion of work meaning, since one otherwise ends up with an indefensible Humpty-Dumptyism, where simply intending an utterance to have a meaning would make it have that meaning. But in fact "successfully realized" [intentions] cannot so serve, since that an [intention] has been "successfully realized" cannot be given a coherent sense that does not presuppose an independent notion of work meaning to which an [intention] can be referred to see if it has indeed been "successfully realized." (2016: 154)

There is, in sum, such a close connection between the framework we bring into interpreting an artwork and the features we can recognize in it that the odds seem stacked in favour of whatever the author states her intentions to be. And this suggests a guarded view, at best, of the extent to which analysis of a film can actually refute external evidence about intentions.[26]

For this reason, in the hypothetical intentionalist's view, when several, divergent interpretative possibilities are consistent with an artwork *taken against its proper historical and authorial background* – what Levinson likes to call "a-text-as-indicated-in-a-context" (1996: 195) – then there is no reason to prefer the version the author says is true. Discussing various possible

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[25] Bordwell (2020) nicely illustrates this idea in a recent blog: "In grasping artworks, even perception has an inferential dimension, going beyond the information given. Patches and contours on the screen are grasped as people, places, and things; sound waves are grasped as speech and music. The process is inferential because these perceptual conclusions are defeasible ... Things might be otherwise than they seem; we bet (fast, unreflectingly) that things are as they seem until other information pulls us up short."

[26] I do wonder, however, whether the objection I am raising here with regards to the purported refutationism of actual intentionalism isn't akin to the criticism that has long been levelled against refutationism *in general*: that theories are so integral to the way we apprehend the world that no theory is ever ultimately defeated on account of the mere facts raised against it. This fundamental epistemological controversy was classically articulated in two antagonistic versions of how scientific knowledge evolves, whether by cumulative progress or by "paradigmatic" shifts: Karl Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge, 1962) and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

readings of what obtains in the fictional story of François Ozon's 2004 film *Swimming Pool*, Levinson contrasts the way the director's extracinematic statements are bound to be received by an actual intentionalist with how a hypothetical intentionalist like himself prefers to treat them:

> If the filmmaker, François Ozon, in fact intended the reading of the film according to which the film's main sequence in France is not real but only *imaginary* – as some of his *outre*-film remarks suggest – then an actual intentionalist will say that *that*, and not the other options, is what the film means, since the film can be read that way ... But I think it is … false that the film means only what it was intended to mean by its maker … The film should rather be taken to mean ambiguously many of the other options noted above. (2016: 160 – emphasis in the original)

Crucially, Levinson questions whether such an authorial intention can really be said to have been *successfully* realized in the artwork, if the latter, judged in its full and proper context, does not in fact preclude the possibility of other, divergent interpretations.[27] This observation perfectly illustrates, to my mind, the fact that the purported refutation test actual intentionalism applies is in fact unduly skewed to confirm statements of authorial intention. I concur with Levinson in thinking we should not defer to authorial statements of intention, even when they do square with (one reading of) the artwork, and even when authors' statements are both plausible and, on all the available evidence, sincere, for authors are not their own best interpreters. Many intentions – artistic or otherwise – are not conscious.

Conclusion; or possibly a cop out

The difficulty in picking a side in the debate between actual and hypothetical intentionalism is that the attractive features of each position are not contingent on, but rather intrinsically tied to, those aspects one might prefer to discard. Actual intentionalism has the advantage of logical clarity: when

[27] "There is a real question … of whether an artist's intention that a work be read or taken in a *given* way W truly *has been* successfully realized if in fact the work appears to be deeply *ambiguous*, that is to say, capable of being reasonably read or taken in a number of *other* ways" (Levinson 2016: 160 – emphasis in the original).

we say that a work expresses a certain meaning, we are asserting this is something *the artwork* expresses, as opposed to being just the thoughts it evokes in us. The meanings can be ascribed to a real entity – the author – that purposefully created them. For all of Levinson's protestations that *hypothetical* intentionalism also targets *actual* intentions, it is hard to escape the conclusion that, by restricting in an artificial manner the kinds of data we have access to, he is condemned to trading in theoretical constructs. The problem Levinson faces is the problem all "surrogate authors" create: they leave us with no clear response to the question of who exactly is the artist we're ascribing an intention to. Is it the real, flesh and bone human being?

Conversely, the price to be paid for the clarity actual intentionalism offers is the admission that when the features of an artwork *do match* an artist's proclaimed intentions, then all other, conflicting hypotheses, however well grounded, will have to be discarded. Carroll suggests it might not be so, when he notices one could still care about actual intentions and yet maintain strong reservations about *statements* of intention.[28] In a similar spirit, Murray Smith outlines the challenges, both practical and epistemic, raised to the reconstruction of actual intentions, but still wishes that it be maintained as a goal; in the meantime, he recommends that "a certain priority" be ascribed to internal evidence (i.e., the features of the artwork) over external data.[29] Then again, Carroll too protests he prefers internal to external evidence: "Most of our interpretive endeavors, even if we are actual intentionalists, are aimed at the text" (2000: 77).

Could we be after the actual author, as Smith defends, while at the same time not deferring to her final authority? If we are going to discount

[28] "One may believe that authorial intent is relevant to interpretation and at the same time maintain strong reservations about the authority of authorial pronouncements about the meaning of their artworks" (2001: 413). Carroll states this in a footnote, but offers no indication of what might then count as reliable evidence of intention.

[29] According to Smith (2010), limitations in the access to evidence of intentions "push us towards a kind of hypothetical intentionalism, which stresses the hypothetical and provisional nature of our interpretations of art works, even as it retains the idea that interpretation is *largely driven by the attempt to track actual intentions*" (emphasis added). The use of modifiers ("*a certain* priority", "*largely* driven") hints at a degree of ambivalence in Smith's position. Moreover, his defence of the pursuit of *actual* intentions while calling his position a brand of *hypothetical* intentionalism results in further ambiguity.

authorial statements of intention when it seems best for us to do so (because a thickly contextualized explanation offers a better, and possibly also aesthetically more interesting, account of the artwork), then it seems more honest to call the intention thus postulated a hypothetical one – our best approximation to the truth – rather than claiming that *that* (i.e., our hypothesis), and not the one the artist herself claims, is the actual – the *really true* – intention. Besides flagrant cases of implausibility and insincerity, when would an actual intentionalist ever be justified in discrediting statements of intention?[30] Livingston's meshing condition – and in particular his insistence that the meshing be allowed to fail *on both sides*, for there are failed interpretations just as there are failed intentions – has the advantage of consistency. If we want the logical clarity actual intentionalists promise with regards to "the question of expressive agency" – which Livingston defines as the response to the question, "Who is ultimately responsible for the meanings or significance of the cinematic work"? (2009: 57) – then we cannot discount statements of intention when they don't please us.

Luckily, in the vast majority of cases, the intention we hypothesize and the one the author consciously expresses will converge; hence, as Levinson makes clear,

> A hypothetical intentionalist is not committed in his or her interpretive endeavors to scorning, or taking no account of, authorial facts such as "expressed intentions in interviews" to mean this or that. Of course such an interpreter can be *guided* by such information, which usually provides valuable hints toward apt interpretation. (2007: 304)

In a recent piece, Levinson reiterates that authors' comments on their own works are often a most interesting form of commentary: "The explicit statements of an author about what he or she intended a work to mean … are simply external commentaries on the work, though with more suggestive or

[30] "The intentionalist is not forced to accept … intention[s] at face value," Carroll reasonably argues. Intentions that are implausible or plainly insincere should be discarded. "The problem of aberrant authorial intentions need not drive us toward anti-intentionalism" (2001: 159). There is no requirement to be gullible.

epistemic value than most such commentaries" (2016: 161). Accordingly, in my analysis of Moretti's films, in Part Two of this thesis, I extensively quote from interviews with the director to illuminate and illustrate my interpretation of his works. As Levinson also says, "hypothetical intentionalism accords the semantic intentions of the actual author a crucial role; only it is a *heuristic*, rather than a *final* one" (2002: 316 – emphasis in the original). Despite my misgivings about fundamental aspects of Levinson's theory, this is a stance I would like to stick to.

It also seems to me that not all statements of authorial intention carry the same weight, for not all of them are equally reliable. The ones, often to do with production history, that are backed by evidence which can be independently verified have a different status from mere declarations about what the work was supposed to mean. In chapter 5, I discuss two minor elements of *Palombella rossa* and conclude that the hypotheses raised in the academic literature about these aspects need almost certainly to be discarded in light of things Moretti has recounted in interviews.[31] On the other hand, in chapter 6, I speculate whether the director's personal trial with a potentially deadly illness might have anything to do with the fact that the topic of death repeatedly emerges in his subsequent *oeuvre* – an idea the filmmaker explicitly rebuffs. In an interview on the occasion of the release of *The Son's Room* (*La stanza del figlio*, 2001), the director admits that "as years go by, we begin to think more about death," but, in the same breath, he forcefully rejects that this could have anything to do with his own trials with cancer. "At that point I wasn't afraid of dying: there was just no time for that. The issue here [in *The Son's Room*] is the death of other people."[32] On this count, however, it seems to me that his testimony doesn't accrue any particular

[31] This refers to the Italianist scholar Carlo Testa's hypotheses about the fact that the action of the film is located in the Aci region, and that one of the characters in the story is a Hungarian athlete. See the section "The political analogy" in chapter 5.

[32] "Avec le passage des années, on commence à penser davantage à la mort. Aucun rapport avec la tumeur dont j'ai été atteint car – peut-être par inconscience – je n'ai jamais eu peur de mourir à ce moment-là. Je n'ai pas eu le temps. Ce qui est en cause, c'est la mort des autres" (Gili 2017: 92). He insists on the same point in other interviews (see, for instance, Codelli 2001: 8).

authority, for individuals often have little or no access to their own deeper psychological motivations.

One might object that the hypothesis I raise on this latter point is unfalsifiable, since we have no way of actually ascertaining the artist's state of mind; furthermore, it is a kind of speculation to which both Bordwell and Levinson are emphatically averse. The latter writes,

> The artist's *state of mind* is not our ultimate goal as interpreters of literary works, but rather what meaning can be ascribed to those works, albeit as the indissociable *products* of those very particular communicative agents; thus not all obtainable evidence as to the artist's state of mind is automatically germane to the project of delineating what the work issuing from that mind and presented in a literary setting arguably means. (Levinson 2002: 313 – emphasis in the original)

Still, the biographical fact of Moretti's illness is not a private piece of information, but rather a public one, and an ideally placed spectator would most likely construe some link between the personal experience the director stages in the third segment of his *Dear Diary* and the themes raised in the epilogue to the first part of the same film (as well as in the later *Aprile*, *The Son's Room*, and *Mia madre*). Moretti's actual experience of cancer is a crucial paratext to *Dear Diary*, and arguably to his subsequent films too.[33] If this is so, then the artist's hypothesized state of mind could be more relevant than his *actual* state of mind, especially given the fact that the latter is ultimately impossible to determine in an objective fashion.

Identification of an author's real intentions always poses problems, of both a practical and an epistemic nature. "Most obviously, there are contingencies of access to the extra-textual evidence of intention: notes, sketches, storyboards and other such preparatory materials may be lost, destroyed, or locked up, and many intentions may never be embodied in material form at all," Smith (2010) notes. But a more radical concern lies in the fact that people often mischaracterize their own motives, even when they have no (deliberate) intention to do so. The meaning of a work may not accord

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[33] See the section titled "Intimations of mortality" in chapter 6.

with conscious thoughts at all, but rather with something that happens as it were below the surface of the author's awareness; and there is no reason to assume that when confronted with such unconscious processes the artist will necessarily recognize them as their own. Smith (2010) again:

> It is plausible to suppose that an artist may embed, say, certain parallels or repetitions in a work without consciously recognizing that they are doing so, or being able to report on their reasons for doing so. Relatedly, … the limitations of memory make it possible that an artist will forget or misremember what they intended … Authors may have systematic reasons for wishing to conceal or even dissemble in relation to their real intentions … There is no guarantee of transparent access to intentions even where we have *prima facie* extra-textual evidence of them.

Thus, while paratextual evidence of intention may be heuristically significant in all the ways noted above – as we will see concretely in the exploration of Moretti's oeuvre in Part Two – the notion that authors generally know best about what they are doing in their artworks is one that I would approach with great caution.

Chapter 3: **Biography and self-representation in the cinema**

> In the kinds of films I make – personal, autobiographical films, as one might call them – I try to exorcise my fears, my neuroses, my obsessions: I try to push them away through the use of irony, as one must do with autobiographical work.[1]
> (Nanni Moretti, in an interview in 1986)

Introduction

Pertinent as they are to my understanding of the director's biographical legend, Bordwell's monographs (on Dreyer and Ozu) do not deal with filmmakers who contribute to their own legend by explicitly depicting themselves in film, as is the case with Moretti. In this chapter, it is this specific dimension of self-representation which will be the focus of my attention. I should note there is a paradoxical aspect to this move, in that the concept of the biographical legend was initially devised by Tomaševskij precisely to deal with authors who inserted themselves, via autobiographical allusion, in their own works. However, as the legend later developed in Bordwell's hands, this element was lost. In a way, then, the issues I discuss here come closer to Tomaševskij's original preoccupations.

Meanwhile, in the previous chapter I have also signalled my dissatisfaction with the Russian formalist's attempt to neatly separate *mere* biography from the more limited aspects of biographical evidence that in his view are admissible in art criticism. Tomaševskij purported to create a hard barrier between the biographical legend and biography *as such*; in my view, such a neat distinction is unsustainable, for we have no way to *a priori* separate the biographical aspects that may be relevant from those that are trivial or inconsequential. This means I need to tackle the biographical question head-on: to consider the pertinence, the possible benefits, but also

[1] "Dans les films que je fais – appelons-les personnels, autobiographiques –, j'essaie d'exorciser mes peurs, mes névroses, mes obsessions, de les éloigner avec l'arme, inévitable quand on se livre à l'autobiographie, de l'ironie" (Gili 2017: 28).

the perils, of using information about an author's life as a relevant context to draw conclusions about the artworks she created. The biographical is of course not the only, and not necessarily the most important, context for making sense of artworks, but I contend it can be relevant in many cases, and it most definitely is in Moretti's.[2] The position I establish in this chapter will then ground my analysis of the Italian filmmaker's work in Part Two of this dissertation, namely with the way I bring biographical evidence to bear on the films.

Here, I will begin by taking a look at Cecilia Sayad's work on directorial self-inscription. Sayad is particularly interested in the way some filmmakers use autobiographical allusions to undermine the purported coherence of the fictional universe of their films. She devotes pages of close analysis to works by Jean-Luc Godard and Woody Allen, though she also mentions Moretti as pertinent to her discussion (even if it is not a case she examines in any detail). While Sayad looks at the disruption of the fictional by the biographical which operates from within the film – when the *actual* Godard or Allen seem to burst in fictional stories – Vivian Sobchack considers a similar problem from the outside, that is, from the standpoint of spectatorial engagement. Sobchack argues that fictional comprehension in the cinema is crosscut by nonfictional aspects – by the spectators' realization that the stories they are presented with are made out of elements of actuality, such as the real people who embody the fictional characters, or the actual places which stand for such characters' addresses, workplaces, and so forth. Information about the *actual* people on the screen can therefore come to the spectators' attention, often regardless of the filmmakers' intentions to do that.

It is no coincidence if both Sayad and Sobchack choose to bring Allen's case for close examination. One of the reasons why Allen's films seem particularly instructive to the issues addressed here is that the questions we

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[2] On the various contextual elements that may be relevant for the appreciation of works of art, I roughly follow Jerrold Levinson's position, which I have outlined in the previous chapter. See in particular the section titled: "Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis".

ask about the pertinence of the biographical angle are ones his fictional narratives repeatedly explore *themselves*. Again and again, the fictional protagonists of Allen's stories are artists in whose work the biographical question is raised; and the same occurs, to various degrees, in several of Moretti's films, perhaps most overtly in *Sweet Dreams* (*Sogni d'oro*, 1981).[3] Additionally, Allen's oeuvre has in recent years been the object of an inordinate amount of critical attention discussing it from a biographical angle. Therefore, by examining the literature that has been produced on the New York filmmaker's work from this angle, I hope to have a clearer grasp of the promise and peril of the biographical approach as such.

Disrupting the diegesis

Like Tomaševskij, Sayad's attention is directed towards the analysis of the "text" (the film "text," so to speak): it is the artist's self-depiction in the work, rather than extratextual information, she is interested in. "Performing authorship stresses the author's presence *in* the text, and not outside it," she writes (2013: 7 – emphasis in the original). Sayad is particularly intrigued by the work of filmmakers whose performances enact or evoke their authorial function – where they directly or indirectly represent their roles *as filmmakers* (as Moretti often does). Clint Eastwood, Roman Polanski, or Spike Lee, for instance, while acting in some of their own movies, fall outside the scope of Sayad's analysis, for the characters they play neither enact nor evoke their role as authors. Instead, Sayad focusses on filmmaker-actors who play characters that re-emerge, with more or less unchanged characteristics, across several films; cases in point are Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Jacques Tati, Mel Brooks, Jerry Lewis, and Woody Allen. The fact that all of the names on this list are comedians is no coincidence: as Maurice Yacowar points out, "whereas in a dramatic performance the role ends when the

[3] The protagonists of *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*, *The Caiman*, and *Mia madre* are also filmmakers in the process of trying to make a film; the co-protagonist of *I Am An Autarkist* is a theatre director trying to stage a play. I will address all of these cases in the chapters of Part Two of this dissertation. Additionally, it has often been plausibly argued that the role played by Moretti, as the fictional psychoanalyst Brezzi, in *We Have A Pope* carries echoes of his position as a film director.

curtain falls, in the comic tradition the successful performer plays variations on the one character type or persona with which he has become identified" (1991: 7). Moretti – particularly in his early films, in the guise of Michele Apicella – must be thought of in relation to this tradition. It is not for nothing that the protagonist of *Ecce bombo* (1978) has a poster of Keaton hanging on the wall next to his bed.

By playing characters that evoke their actual selves (and specifically themselves as film directors), these filmmaker-actors undermine, in Sayad's view, the integrity of the fictional world of their own films. "Rather than blending into the depicted worlds and disappearing into different characters, these actor-directors evoke both their roles in previous films and their public personas" (2013b: 20). The blur between actor and character can be so profound that they are ultimately never taken to be entirely "off-screen": no public appearance by them is off-character, and, conversely, no filmic performance is ever sealed off from real-life events. For this reason – to take one of Sayad's central cases – it would be impossible to distinguish "Woody Allen" (the persona) from the actual Allen, something that has led many critics to disavow an interest in the biographical question altogether, considering the flesh-and-blood human being to be unknowable or irrelevant. This is not a view I share: since I believe the author is indeed relevant for an understanding of the work (as the discussion in the previous two chapters should make clear), we need to carefully parse out what features belong to such a person, as opposed to those of character(s) within fictional stories.

Emerging across several films, the figures played by Chaplin, Keaton, and the like do not fully belong in any single fictional world. In Allen's films, the characters he embodies go by different names, have different jobs, various marital circumstances; and yet, some crucial idiosyncrasies persist, so that we recognize a persona beneath this variety. In this sense, the persona is both one and multiple. Furthermore, its features are partly inspired by the filmmaker-actor's own biography, even if the characters Allen plays are not autobiographical *sensu stricto*. Sayad speaks of a single figure – not quite fictional, not quite Woody Allen himself – "inhabiting different scenarios":

> The parts played by Allen share very similar traits – the Jewish background, the unglamorous Brooklyn childhood, the conflicted relationship with psychoanalysis, the attraction to sexy and neurotic women, the love of jazz and of the movies. His trademark black-rimmed glasses and balding dishevelled head lead to the perception of such characters as the same figure inhabiting different scenarios. (2013b: 20)

Each of the traits singled out by Sayad in this description of the Allen persona match an aspect of Allen's actual, biographical self. Indexical representation plays a crucial role here, Allen's body providing the ultimate link between these various characters. Furthermore, to the extent that the persona builds upon some of the filmmaker's actual biographic features, it is as if it signalled the actual Allen creeping up beneath the various fictional incarnations.

Something very similar happens with Moretti. Comparisons between the Italian filmmaker and his New Yorker counterpart were very common in the first two decades of Moretti's career, an analogy the Italian filmmaker himself has made. In an interview in 1986, he pointed out his method resembled Allen's in their shared "insistence on always playing the same character."[4] Although Moretti plays a figure by the name of Michele Apicella in five of his first six features, there is no strict narrative continuity between these fictions.[5] The characters' personal circumstances in each instalment are incompatible with one another, so we know the film is not meant to represent, strictly speaking, the same fictional person at a different point in life. And yet the figures Moretti embodies can be said to stay constant in that they have some recognizable traits, some of them carrying on even after Moretti starts playing characters bearing other names. Because such traits are constant from film to film, it is as if they did not quite belong to the *fictional* world of the story: it is as if they formed the essence of Moretti's persona, who he

[4] "En bien ou en mal, mes films ont un sens parce que j'en contrôle le processus du début à la fin. En Italie, vous ne trouverez pas d'exemple notable de ce type de travail. Ce qui est étrange, c'est le fait de toujours insister sur le même personnage: en ce sens ma démarche rappelle celle de Woody Allen" (Gili 2017: 31).

[5] Strictly speaking, the protagonist of the first two films is simply called Michele, and Michele Apicella in *Sweet Dreams*, *Bianca* and *Palombella rossa*. The protagonist of *The Mass is Ended* is Don Giulio, but there are hints to suggest that, before being ordained a priest, his name was also Michele. See below.

really is. This is, of course, an illusion, for there is no promise of nonfictional reliability to the films Moretti features in.

The illusion is reinforced by the fact that all of the characters Moretti embodies do share some biographical traits with the actor who plays them, and who, as director and screenwriter, created them. Even the names point to that. The composite "Michele Apicella" winks at the partly invented, partly autobiographical nature of the character: while Apicella is actually Moretti's mother's maiden name, Michele is an arbitrary choice. "The name came to me by chance," the filmmaker says. "It just seemed like a good first name: a little sad, neither too unusual nor overly common."[6] After shedding this *alter ego*, Moretti would feature under his own name in *Dear Diary* (*Caro diario*, 1993), *Aprile* (1998), and *The Caiman* (*Il caimano*, 2006).[7] Whether the character "Nanni Moretti" matches the actual filmmaker any more closely than "Michele" do is something that should not be presumed.

The figure's basic psychological features remain consistent, but his specific traits are, to an extent, a function of the plot. "Inevitably, with the creation of the story, the character acquires its autonomy," the filmmaker explains.[8] By his own estimation, biographical coincidences between Michele and himself feature largest in *Ecce bombo*, a film which satirizes his actual milieu at the time, even if *Sweet Dreams* was taken to be the most autobiographical, because the protagonist was a young filmmaker.[9] The following two films, *Bianca* (1984) and *The Mass Is Ended* (*La messa è finita*, 1985), went to show that Michele could still be the same recognizable character even if he embodied features that had nothing to do with Moretti's

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[6] "La première fois, le nom de Michele m'est venu par hasard. Il me semble que c'était un beau prénom, un peu triste, ni particulièrement original, ni particulièrement ordinaire comme peuvent l'être Gianni, Andrea, Fabrizio, Gianfranco" (Gili 2017: 25).

[7] In *The Son's Room* (*La stanza del figlio*, 2001) and *Mia madre* (2015), Moretti plays (two different) characters under the name of Giovanni, which happens to be his actual first name (Nanni being a nickname).

[8] "Inévitablement, en construisant le récit, le personnage acquiert son autonomie" (Gili 2017: 27).

[9] Moretti adds that, while very often a filmmaker's debut feature is the most directly autobiographical one, in his case there were two very significant differences between the protagonist of *I Am An Autarkist* and himself: the director was not the father of a boy at the time, and he had never been part of a theatre troupe. "Dans le détail, le film le plus autobiographique, c'est sans doute *Ecce bombo*" (Gili 2017: 27).

personal circumstances: the protagonist of the former film was a serial-killer, the next one a priest. "Perhaps with *Bianca* and *The Mass Is Ended* I started creating a character who had more autonomy in relation to me," Moretti admits.[10] Since *Bianca* and *The Mass is Ended* develop more consistent and autonomous fictional worlds than had been the case with Moretti's first three feature films, it is not surprising that the "configurational aspect" of the protagonist – how his features fit into a fictional story – gains a certain precedence over the "recognitional aspect" – the extent to which he resembles a person (be this person the actual Moretti or his previous fictional incarnations).[11] In any event, the "Morettian" quality of Moretti's protagonists does not depend on strict mimesis. The plane in which the protagonists of *Bianca* and *The Mass is Ended* still resemble the filmmaker is the existential one: "Their psychological journey is my own," Moretti says in the same interview in 1986. "I can see where those characters come from, their thirst for perfection, for the absolute, their attention to other people's happiness, their search for harmony."[12] The director has also stated they share a similar "craving for morality."[13]

A persona has both a narrative and a visual dimension, as Sayad observes. She reads Allen's physical constancy in the films as attesting to what, on a narrative level, would be his characters' inability to change (2013: 112). Allen's silhouette, and his black-rimmed glasses in particular, have acquired "the branding quality of a logo," according to Sayad (2013: 111).

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[10] "Peut-être qu'avec *Bianca* et *La messe est finie* j'ai commencé à construire un personnage ayant davantage d'autonomie par rapport à moi" (Gili 2017: 27-28).

[11] I am alluding here to the phenomenon Murray Smith has called "the twofoldness of characters", and which in his view applies to all kinds of fictional stories, not only those that depend on a visual medium: "So readily do we recognize in fictions these 'virtual persons' we call characters that we can speak of them and respond to them in many ways just as if they were actual persons … That is one side of the twofoldness of characters [the recognitional aspect] … We exhibit awareness of the configurational aspect of character whenever we note or notice something bearing upon the *designed* status of a character, when we see a character as an element in a representation" (Smith 2011b: 280 – emphasis in the original).

[12] "Dans les films suivant [*Bianca* and *The Mass is Ended*] au-delà des épisodes singuliers, autobiographiques ou non (je ne suis ni un professeur assassin, ni un prêtre – je n'ai jamais pensé à la prêtrise), les personnages commencent à prendre davantage d'autonomie même si je ressens comme mien leur parcours psychologique. Je sens les bases d'où partent ces deux personnages, leur soif de perfection, d'absolu, leur attention au bonheur des autres, leur recherche de l'harmonie" (Gili 2017: 28).

[13] "La soif de moralité qu'ont mes personnages, il est clair que c'est une chose que je ressens comme mienne" (Gili 2017: 27).

Similarly, in Moretti's case, continuity is reinforced at the graphic level by Moretti's trademark beard, a trace of his physical presence that remains constant through the vast majority of his films. Indeed, some of the exceptions are themselves significant, because they are meant to signal a *narrative* change: in Moretti's third film, *Sweet Dreams*, a story where Michele has a sort of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, two-faced nature, his facial hair changes according to the reality status of the scenes: in the present time of the story, he has a moustache, but in the scenes depicting his nightmares he has a full beard.[14] In the only film where he goes clean-shaven, *The Mass Is Ended*, Moretti plays a priest, a character who, for the first time in Moretti's directorial career, is – ostensibly – not Michele.[15] In Moretti's case, Sayad's idea of the director's silhouette as logo has acquired a literal import, as his image driving a scooter in *Dear Diary* was converted into the actual symbol of Sacher Film, Moretti's production and distribution company.[16] When, later on, he became a father – an experience documented in *Aprile* – Sacher's logo accommodated this biographical event by adding a child perched on Moretti's back, as if to imply a fundamental change in his persona.

The persona does not merely signal the presence of a constant figure across several fictional roles: in Sayad's account, biographical traits may constitute an *intrusion* on the fiction and actively disrupt the story's verisimilitude. Referring especially to Jean-Luc Godard and Woody Allen, Sayad notes that some of the characters these two directors embody display features that put them deliberately at odds with the fictional worlds they

[14] In his first two feature films, *I Am An Autarkist* and *Ecce bombo*, Moretti sports only a moustache.

[15] Several hints suggest that Moretti's character might still be Michele, an impression the filmmaker has reinforced in an interview: "Maybe the protagonist of *The Mass Is Ended* is also called Michele. I think priests often change their names upon being ordained. This one is Don Giulio – Don Michele didn't sound right – but perhaps before becoming a priest his name was Michele." "Peut-être que le protagoniste de *La messe est finie* s'appelle aussi Michele. Je crois que les prêtres changent souvent de nom lorsqu'ils sont ordonnés. Ici, il s'appelle Don Giulio – Don Michele ça ne sonnait pas bien – mais peut-être qu'avant son ordination il s'appelait Michele" (Gili 2017: 25).

[16] In a 1998 interview for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the critics Nicolas Saada and Serge Toubiana point out that, with his Vespa and his white helmet, Moretti has forged "a very graphic, very visual" character. Moretti explicitly refers to the idea of "a trademark". "*Q:* Avec *Aprile*, comme avec *Caro diario*, … tu as forgé une figure, très dessinée, très visuelle, avec la Vespa, le casque blanc … *A:* Ce n'est pas un tic. Ça ressemble plutôt à une sorte de marque déposée." However, when the critics suggest a parallel with Chaplin, Moretti pulls back: "Je t'en conjure, ne fais pas de telles comparaisons (*rires*)" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 58-59).

supposedly belong to. In Godard's *First Name: Carmen* (*Prénom Carmen*, 1983), "most of [his] character's lines make allusions to the author's biography – but in the world of the story they make no sense" (Sayad 2013: 115). Similarly, in both Allen's *Sleeper* (1973) and *Love and Death* (1975) the protagonist anachronistically carries his trademark large-framed glasses, even though the latter movie is set in 19th century Russia, and the former in the distant future year of 2173. "Allen's image refuses to be completely absorbed in the fictional illusion … evoking both the real man and his other pictures" (Sayad 2013: 112). Peter J. Bailey concurs:

> Even when Allen plays characters bearing personal histories divergent from his own in films set in other lands or eras (*Love and Death*, *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *Shadows and Fog*), the small, Jewish, self-doubting, God-seeking, death-fixated egocentric who stutters when threatened and unaccountably attracts the screen's most beautiful women ultimately emerges, becoming the figure we conceptualize as that aggregate cinematic fabrication, "Woody Allen". (2001: 59)

In this respect, Godard and Allen significantly differ from those comic filmmakers Sayad also mentions: while Chaplin's "the Tramp" or Tati's "Monsieur Hulot" partially stood out from the narrative world of each particular film due to their constancy, it was still possible to make sense of their characters in terms that were consistent with the story-world of each individual film. In Godard's and Allen's films, this becomes impossible, since the characters directly point to biographical events that are incomprehensible strictly in terms of the diegesis.[17]

However, what disrupts the fictional diegesis is not the biographical element *as such*. To demonstrate this point, Sayad contrasts the cases of Godard and Allen with Larry David's TV series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (1999-2011), a pseudo-biographical account of its author's life. Even though a person by the name of Larry David does indeed exist, and shares many features with

[17] Amongst other characters who refuse to be "fully absorbed" by the diegetic world, Sayad (2013: 138-139) mentions Moretti's (in *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*) as well as Takeshi Kitano's (in *Glory to the Filmmaker*, 2007). I would suggest the most apt examples from Moretti's oeuvre would be his early films, which I discuss in the next chapter. In any event, Sayad does not elaborate on Moretti's case, and her list is not meant to be exhaustive.

the series' protagonist, this does not interfere with the self-enclosed world of the television narrative: if no actual David existed, the story would still make sense. While the biographical elements *may* interfere on the level of spectatorial *engagement* (as spectators wonder whether, and in what ways, the character resembles the actual person), the series is internally coherent. Godard's and Allen's films, on the other hand, contain elements that can *only* be understood by reference to the world outside the picture; in this sense, these elements are intrinsically disruptive. Furthermore, in the case of Godard (as in Moretti's) this is directly linked to Brecht's influence, a connection whose significance will be explored in some detail in the next chapter.

In order to understand the roles played by Godard and Allen as intruders in their own fictions, Sayad directs our attention to the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), and in particular to Bakhtin's discussion of the figure of the fool. In pre-modern forms of entertainment – such as popular theatre, variety shows, or the circus – the fool provides comic relief and commentary on the main action. The fool is an in-between figure, one who both belongs and does not quite belong in the diegetic world: "[it] has often been perceived as a temporary visitor, as an outsider to the diegesis, existing between the staged numbers and the audience" (Sayad 2013: 109). In Allen's films, the characters played by Allen often function this way – *unlike*, that is, all the other characters in those films. Something very similar happens with Moretti in *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*: time and again, the character narrates the events to the camera *as they happen*, as if other characters around him could not hear him (a device whose effects I discuss in some detail in chapter 6). Since the (present-time) narration takes place in the same space of the depicted events (which belong in the past), a clash of temporalities occurs. Moreover, since the actor who narrates is also the protagonist of the events being represented, it is as if suddenly the agent in the story became a narrator who is external to it.[18] In

[18] "Así pues, durante su diálogo con la masajista, el personaje resulta súbitamente apartado del tiempo, del nivel temporal que le es propio al encarnar en él la voz del narrador" (Sánchez 2013: 29).

these instances, Moretti is the only character to have the ability to detach himself from the action and comment on it retrospectively, as it were.

Sayad traces such features of Allen's humour back to the American filmmaker's beginnings in stand-up comedy. While the lines the stand-up comedian delivers in character do not attempt to create a self-enclosed, plausible fictional universe, they are also *not* meant to be taken nonfictionally (as "truth claims"). She explains:

> However fictive their stories, [stand-up] comedians do not usually incarnate characters in the strict sense; whether exaggerating real facts for comic purposes or describing imagined situations, their job is to tell jokes and comment on current events, and not to consolidate an altogether fictional world. (2013: 128)

The stand-up comedian, therefore, relies on a peculiar combination of the fictional and the autobiographical: "Their tales may be fictive, but they are conveyed to us as if they had been experienced by the artists themselves," Sayad concludes. Even when they bear their own names on stage (which is often the case), they do not depict actual persons, but rather exaggerated, comical distortions.

Unlike Allen, Moretti has never done stand-up, and yet Sayad's description does resonate with the kind of "weak" fiction Moretti is often engaged in creating, both in his early features and in the later *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*. In *I Am An Autarkist* (*Io sono un autarchico*, 1976) and *Ecce bombo*, the plot itself is thin; non-sequiturs abound, as well as the kind of "jokes about current events" and "comments on the mores of everyday life" that Sayad deems typical of stand-up as a genre (2013: 129). In *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* (both from the 1990s), there are barely any characters besides Moretti, just a succession of observations, commentaries, and anecdotes. While a number of imaginary situations are depicted in these diaristic films, there is no overall fictional narrative.[19] A certain familiarity with Italian culture of the late 1970s and the 1990s, respectively, is required to

[19] *Dear Diary* is composed of three autonomous segments. The third of these is perfectly narrative – it just isn't fictional.

understand these films, given the prominent role played both by observations on current politics and by comical dabs at fads and social mores.

Over the course of his career, Moretti (like Woody Allen) has tended to move towards more consolidated fictional worlds, an evolution that can be traced to the decision to write in collaboration with a professional screenwriter, for the first time, in *Bianca*; Moretti would again share writing credits in *The Mass is Ended*, *The Son's Room*, *The Caiman*, *We Have A Pope* (*Habemus Papam*, 2011), and *Mia madre* (2015), all of these films being significantly more cohesive, from a narrative standpoint, than the ones Moretti has written on his own. Nevertheless, to speak of a general movement in the direction of more consolidated fictional narratives is not meant to imply strict linearity, for even in recent narrative fictions, such as *The Caiman* or *We Have A Pope*, Moretti's older strand of topical humour emerges at several points. The difference between Moretti's recent and earlier work is a matter of degree and overall balance.

Biographical echoes and spectatorial engagement

Whereas Sayad focuses her attention on the cues filmmakers include in the artwork – to break the fictional diegesis from the inside – Sobchack draws attention to how this rupture can be provoked from the spectator's subjective experience. As Sobchack points out, photographic fictions are always perceived at two concurrent levels: "we engage the cinema as both fiction and documentary" (2004: 261). Films are never merely made up of characters pursuing plot lines in a fictional world, for spectators know they are watching actors, in stories invented by writers, set in visual scenarios conjured by directors. Therefore, the extent to which the diegesis becomes a world unto itself is always relative. Through the course of a single viewing, there are moments when the spectator's engagement with the fiction is suspended, or interrupted, by nonfictional comprehension. In Sobchack's view,

> what we call documentary or fiction films are … the sedimented and reified objects of a much more dynamic and mutable experience that is not adequately described by such binary generic terms. (2004: 272)

Notice that she is speaking from a phenomenological angle, that is, about the spectatorial *experience*. "The word *phenomenon* has a special meaning to phenomenologists," as Sarah Bakewell clarifies in a recent book. "It denotes any ordinary thing or object or event *as it presents itself to my experience*, rather than as it may or may not be in reality" (2016: 40 – emphasis in the original). In this vein, Sobchack is *not* proposing that films, when taken in their entirety, could be indifferently classified as fictional or nonfictional: "This is *not* to say" – she takes good care to emphasise – "that what constitutes a fiction or documentary film is determined solely by – and within – the experience of the individual spectator" (2004: 272). Certainly the spectators' engagement is oriented by narrative and stylistic conventions, advanced publicity, and other extracinematic hints which signal how the film is to be viewed.[20] The notion that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction should be considered as an individual matter, or as a question of arbitrary choice, would be false. Carl Plantinga drives this point home with great clarity:

> If the fiction/nonfiction distinction is all in the mind, or is the function of the way that individuals "read" a film, then the distinction becomes highly individualistic and subjective, as though the individual were the ultimate arbiter of a film genre or type. (2009: 496)[21]

Thanks to such conventions, working both within the films and outside of them (in publicity, interviews, criticism, etc.), actual confusion about the

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[20] "The individual spectator is always also immersed in history and in a culture in which there is general social consensus not only as to the ontological status (if not the interpretation) of what stands as profilmic reality but also to the regulative hermeneutic rules that govern how one is to read and take up its representation" (Sobchack 2004: 272-273).

[21] Plantinga proceeds to offer an analogy with Wittgensteinian echoes: "A culture often defines human artifacts according to their design and function. A screwdriver is designed to put in screws and a hammer to pound in and remove nails. Of course, I am free to *use* the hammer in my attempts to tighten a screw, but it wasn't designed for that function and my attempts may come to naught. Furthermore, although I am free to *use* the hammer for all sorts of purposes for which it was not originally designed, I cannot *define* the hammer in any way I see fit. This is because definitions are socially and not individually constructed" (2009: 496 – emphasis in the original).

status of a work is rare. When fiction and nonfiction are indeed combined, it is the audiences' familiarity with the fact that distinct norms generally operate in each genre that enables them to appreciate the meshing, as Sobchack herself points out (2004: 264-265). What interests Sobchack are not so much the ambiguous cases (where the spectator is challenged to determine whether what she is seeing is fictional or nonfictional), but the fact that – *in the spectator's experience* – the boundary between the two is permeable: that it can be crossed, and that it often is. "Nonfictional *understanding* intimates the indexical aspect of all [photographic] images, including those that belong to fiction," the Brazilian documentary filmmaker João Moreira Salles writes, articulating a similar sentiment. "By contrast, the non-fictional *artefact* … is independent of the use one makes of it. It is a convention, a social phenomenon."[22]

To illustrate her point, Sobchack evokes an episode in which she was watching *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du Jeu*, Jean Renoir, 1939), and felt her engagement with the fictional story to be abruptly transformed by the famous scene where a rabbit is killed. In the midst of the fictional plot, Sobchack was jolted by the realization that the camera had captured the moment when that rabbit had *actually* died: the fictional representation of a rabbit being killed had entailed an actual killing. Sobchack says that, for her, the rabbit's "quivering death leap transformed fictional into documentary space, symbolic into indexical representation" (2004: 269), prompting existential questions she deems typical of documentary, rather than fictional, cinema. But she also notes that this transformation of fictional into documentary engagement needs not be provoked by an external event. Virtually anything can alter one's subjective relationship to the image, whether it is something that happens in the film, in the room where the spectator watches it, or simply in the viewer's mind:

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[22] "É útil fazer aqui uma distinção entre compreensão não-ficcional e artefato não-ficcional. A compreensão não-ficcional nos permite perceber o que há de indicial em toda a imagem, até mesmo naquelas que pertencem ao campo da ficção. Já o artefato não-ficcional ... independe dos usos individuais que se façam dele. Ele é uma convenção, um fenômeno social" (Salles 2005: 62).

> All of us, at one time or another …, have found ourselves suddenly watching actors rather than characters, looking at sets and locations rather than inhabiting a narrative world, gazing at scenes and histrionics rather than participating in significant events and feeling intensified emotions … The result is that a supposedly fictional space is experienced – and evaluated – as documentary space. (Sobchack 2004: 274)

When what Sobchack calls a “documentary consciousness” erupts in the middle of a narrative fiction film, characters, as it were, “become” actors, that is, people with particular biographies.

Sobchack further discusses this phenomenon with reference to Woody Allen’s fictional *Husbands and Wives* (1992), a notable case of ironic self-reflexivity. At the time of the film’s commercial release, Allen – the director and male protagonist – was in the midst of acrimonious separation from his long-time partner, Mia Farrow, who also happened to be his co-star in the film. The break-up was made particularly bitter – and particularly savoury for voyeuristic scrutiny – by the fact that it was prompted by Farrow’s discovery of Allen’s romantic entanglement with her own adopted daughter, then 21 year-old Soon-Yi Previn.

The most striking thing about Allen's 1992 film is the way its fictional story partly appears to address aspects of the actors’ real life situation: in the fiction, Allen and Farrow play Gabe and Judy, a couple also going through a break-up. Even before *Husbands and Wives* had been released, an article in *The New York Times* (Grimes 1992) put side-to-side the shooting schedule for the film with what was then known, through Farrow and Allen’s own testimony, about their separation, and noticed intriguing parallels. Just two days after Farrow found out about Allen’s affair with her daughter, they apparently shot the scene where their fictional characters split up. At the very moment Allen was having an affair with the 21-year-old Soon-Yi, the fictional character he embodied was having a fling with the 20-year-old Rain (Juliette Lewis) in the story.[23] Indeed, Farrow would later accuse Allen of

[23] As a little girl, Soon-Yi Previn was found on her own on the streets of Seoul. Due to such circumstances, her exact age is uncertain (Merkin 2018).

making her enact her real-life circumstances on film before she herself was privy to the details of such a situation.[24]

Profiting from the huge public attention the couple's brawl had drawn, Tri-Star, the distribution company, decided not just to accelerate the premiere of *Husbands and Wives*, but to dramatically increase its circulation: from plans for an opening release in eight theatres in the US, it expanded to 800 across the country. Meanwhile, ahead of the Presidential election that would take place in November of that year, the Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich accused Allen, at a public rally, of "having incest with a nondaughter for whom he is a nonfather" (Adler 1992), thereby amplifying the public repercussions of the story. "Family values" formed the core of the Republican platform that year, and Allen was supposed to illustrate the lack thereof. In *The New York Times*, the critic Caryn James (1992) described the film as "the movie tie-in to a scandal, a piece of merchandise being rushed to the market to take advantage of publicity."

It is easy to be misled by a few superficial resemblances into imagining wide correspondences between fiction and biography, so we must tread cautiously here. In crucial ways, *Husbands and Wives* does not match the details of Allen and Farrow's lives: for one thing, Allen's character in the fiction ends up alone, whereas Farrow's eventually marries the man she had been secretly longing for (Michael, played by Liam Neeson). Furthermore, this variation on what obtained in real life arguably plays an important *narrative* function: allegiance with the fictional male lead might be harder to sustain if he did end up with the young woman, and Farrow's character on her own. Moreover, a critical element in the real-life debacle was the fact that Allen was having an affair with Farrow's own adopted daughter, something which undoubtedly raised the stakes of the situation vis-à-vis the one depicted in the film. To treat *Husbands and Wives* as a *document*, the trace of something that occurred in Allen and Farrow's real lives, is one thing; but to

[24] "Ms. Farrow later expressed dismay that Mr. Allen had made her play out a fictional version of the triangle with her adopted daughter, Soon-Yi, before she learned of the affair" (Dowd 1995).

construe it as a *documentary* would be wrong.[25] Still, a number of critics detected bad faith at work. James, for instance, saw the young woman with whom Gabe has a fling in the fiction as a proxy for the real-life Previn, and thought both young women (the fictional and the real one) were being cast as seductresses.[26] Similarly, the *New York Times*' columnist Maureen Dowd (1995) would later on compare Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995) to "a propaganda film", "an infomercial with bad info."

Importantly, what matters for my purposes is not so much what actually obtained in terms of correspondence between life and fiction, but how the events depicted in the fiction evoked what *audiences thought they knew*: how the film spoke to Allen and Farrow's biographical legends. Sobchack recounts it was virtually impossible to watch certain scenes of *Husbands and Wives* without entertaining the fantasy of seeing the artists enact on the screen the events of their own separation. The echoes, at the level of dialogue, were so close that it seemed the film itself was inviting the audience to speculate on the line separating fact from fiction:

> During a bedtime conversation in which the couple discusses the sudden marital separation of close friends, Judy asks Gabe, "Do you ever hide things from me?" With those words she was suddenly transformed for most contemporary viewers into Farrow – and the space ethically charged with Allen's (not Gabe's) hesitant response, "Of course not." Most of us in the audience knew this response to be a lie insofar as Allen was concerned. (Sobchack 2004: 277)

The public commotion around Allen and Farrow's break-up is a "factual" paratext, in Gérard Genette's terms, and paratexts can disappear over time, as the French literary theorist pointed out; all the more so in the case of epitexts, that is, those paratextual elements that are physically

[25] I am following Plantinga (2009: 495-496) here. A documentary is a film that makes a claim about what obtains in actuality. *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) is a document of various things (e.g., Judy Garland in her teenage years), but it is not a documentary.

[26] "On screen, Rain is the aggressor. Off screen, Mr. Allen has explained that he took nude photographs of Ms. Previn because she asked him to" (James 1992). In my view, the critic reads hastily from fact to fiction, and seems to grossly misunderstand Rain's character as a result.

located outside the text.[27] The prominence this kind of information gains with the public may very well wither away. We could therefore posit a viewer – perhaps decades into the future – completely unaware about the biographical back-story. Still, a spectator who was entirely unfamiliar with this context would be missing out on a crucial aspect of what the film does. It is not enough to say Allen's film illustrates the extent to which information about directors and actors infiltrates our relation to narrative fictions, for – at the level of both plot and style – *Husbands and Wives* evinces an active, deliberate effort to engage with what audiences believe they know. To ignore the biographical would therefore lessen our ability to appreciate the film. As if to imply the urgency required to capturing events as they are *actually* happening, Allen employs a "pseudodocumentary cinema-verité style," as Bailey calls it, with extensive use of handheld camera with shaky movements. The critic vividly evokes the irony in the *mise-en-scène*:

> In the beginning of *Husbands and Wives*, the camera seems utterly helpless to keep up with the characters' movements, at one point losing Judy (Farrow) completely as she flees angrily for her bedroom, focusing pointlessly on a fireplace she's passed before zooming clumsily in futile pursuit of her down the hallway she's already vacated. (Bailey 2001: 187-188)

The effect of this is a far cry from the clarity of narrative presentation typical of most Allen films.[28] Additionally, characters directly address the camera at several points, responding to questions from an off-screen interviewer who is never seen, as if to create the impression that we are watching a reportage, an investigation into actual events. Allen had already used similar devices in earlier films, notably in *Annie Hall* (1977) and in the mockumentary *Zelig* (1983); in some respects, *Husbands and Wives* looks like a mockumentary, only this time an autobiographical one – a fake account of Allen's personal life.

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[27] As I have signalled in chapter 2 (above), Genette explicitly cites two cinematic forms of the paratext: the credits and the trailers (1997 [1987]: 407). Whereas the former appears in the text (peritext), the latter is external to it (epitext).

[28] Bailey again: "*Husbands and Wives* is distinctive among Allen's films for the extent to which its cinematography and scene construction reproduce the raw emotionality of the film's plot" (2001: 185-186). He dedicates three illuminating pages (185-188) to the analysis of style in *Husbands and Wives*.

The resonances between Allen's work and his actual life – including his romantic life – did not spring up unannounced with *Husbands and Wives*, but had instead patiently been built over many years. *Annie Hall* – which two decades earlier had consecrated the director with a batch of Oscars[29] – recounted the love story and eventual break-up of two characters who shared a number of important features with the actors who played them; indeed, the story drew much of its dramatic force from those resonances. The fictional protagonist of *Annie Hall*, Alvy Singer, is a stand-up comedian, as Allen himself had been. The film incorporates archival footage of the actual Allen on *The Dick Cavett Show*, as if this was a record of the fictional Singer performing; and it has Singer delivering gags that had actually been part of Allen's 1960s stand-up routine (Bailey 2001: 59). The fictional narrative of *Annie Hall* centres on the hero's love affair with the eponymous female lead, a character played by Diane Keaton, an actress whose actual surname is Hall. It was a matter of public knowledge that Allen and Keaton had indeed dated briefly a few years earlier, and, like the two fictional figures they embody in the film, had stayed friends after the split (and remain so to this day).[30] None of this is to say that *Annie Hall* is *really* about Allen and Keaton's relationship: as a matter of fact, one of the central themes the film dramatizes is the *difference* between the way things are depicted in a romantic comedy and the way they turn out in real life. In the story, the male protagonist writes a play based on his relationship with Annie that is *not* faithful to how things transpired in real (diegetically real) life. Bailey describes:

> In the play Alvy (Allen) writes, … the couple has a fractious confrontation in a Los Angeles health food restaurant, one culminating – as it never does in the film framing the play – in an utterly unmotivated reconciliation providing Alvy's drama with a happy ending … Apologizing for the sentimentality of his happy ending, Alvy asks the movie audience, "Tsch, whatta you want? It was

[29] It won Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Actress. Perhaps more importantly, Allen was nominated for Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Original Screenplay – the first person to get this triple distinction since Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, in 1941.

[30] In a recent piece, the journalist David Klion (2018) counts the many ways in which *Annie Hall* draws upon the protagonists' actual lives.

> my first play. You know how you're always tryin' t' get things to come out perfect in art because it's real difficult in life." (2001: 34).

To say that the relationship between fictional representation and actual biographical events is at the core of several of Allen's films must therefore not be taken to imply a transparent relationship between the two spheres.

Husbands and Wives is also not the first fictional film that seems to indirectly comment on the state of Allen's actual relationship with Farrow, or to reflect on how the filmmaker saw his real-life spouse. Farrow stars in all thirteen movies Allen directed between 1981 and 1992, a period during which, moreover, she stopped working with any other filmmaker. Whatever idea we created about her actual personality in this period is bound to have been influenced by the way she was depicted in Allen's fictional films: Farrow's biographical legend was decisively shaped by Allen. As Bailey observes, "if viewers share the illusion of possessing special insight into the evolution of the Farrow/Allen relationship, their illusion is one which Allen's movies have contributed to fostering" (2001: 184). Of course "illusion" is the crucial term here.

The fact that Allen's films draw on biographical experiences is in itself unremarkable: arguably all fiction does, to a greater or lesser extent. What makes his work – and *Husbands and Wives* in particular – interesting from the standpoint of the relationship between the fictional and the biographical is the *mise en abyme*: the film *itself* raises the issue of how we are to read the relationship between art and life. The protagonist of the fictional story, Gabe, is a writer of fiction, and one who *does* transpose the sentimental troubles he experiences into his work. The student he flirts with, Rain, trounces his manuscript for a novel on account of the portrait it offers about the mind of its author. She tells him:

> Isn't it beneath you as a mature thinker to allow your lead character to waste so much of his emotional energy obsessing over this psychotic relationship with a woman that *you* fantasize as powerfully sexual, when in fact she was pitifully sick? (*apud* Bailey 2001: 191 – emphasis added.)

For my purposes, the key term in this passage is "you": does Rain mean that Gabe, the author, fantasizes the fictional female character in his book as powerful, or does she mean the male *character* within Gabe's novel fantasizes his female counterpart as powerful? From the first to the second part of the sentence, there occurs a subtle slippage, as if for Rain there were no difference between the fictional protagonist's perspective and that of Gabe, the author.[31] Her comments are first of all a jab at Gabe, suggesting he (as the author of the manuscript) has a childish tendency to fantasize young women (like herself) as powerfully sexual. On a second level, though – and more importantly – Rain's words can be read as an indictment of the author of the very fictional story she is a part of, i.e., a critique of *Allen* (and a feminist one at that). For, if Gabe's characters and plot are a reflection of Gabe's personal shortcomings, then what do the characters and plot of a Woody Allen film say about the director?[32] From within the film text, the character produces a caustic assessment of the themes, preoccupations, and indulgences of *Husbands and Wives*, and not merely of the film *as film*, but of the mind behind it.

The plot of *Husbands and Wives* therefore dramatizes the question of whether the artwork can be taken to reflect its author's life and thoughts, Gabe's novel representing, within the fictional diegesis, the very film we are watching.[33] This is a question the film itself, in its own way, speaks of. And yet, amidst the uproar around his separation from Farrow, Allen insistently proclaimed: "Movies are fiction. The plots of my movies don't have any relationship to my life" (Isaacson 1992), an idea he has since reiterated.[34] Such a blunt statement is one the film itself questions. As Bailey shows, "If

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[31] Even if the fictional protagonist of Gabe's novel were also its narrator – something we are not in a position to ascertain – the latter's perspective should not be mistaken for that of the author. On the phenomenon of unreliable narration in Allen's films, I will have more to add below.

[32] "Rain's critique of Gabe's manuscript is a sophisticated reading of the text as a reflection of the character and values of its author, her indictment inevitably widening outward to include the author's author in its condemnation" (Bailey 2001: 191).

[33] "Gabe's novel … often serves as the film's equivalent in the plot" (Bailey 2001: 192).

[34] In a 2015 interview for NPR, for instance: "I never see any evidence of anything in my private life resonating in film" (Fragoso 2015).

there is anything *Husbands and Wives* is *not* about, it is absolute demarcations between art and life" (2001: 192).

In the critic's view, interrogating the audience about the ways fiction relates to life is furthermore central not just to this particular film, but to Allen's thematic project as a whole, because the ultimate question his work struggles with is whether art helps us to live, by remedying life's imperfections, or whether it harms us, by enabling us to lie, and not just to others but also to ourselves. The films ponder whether cinema is a means for attaining some sort of truth, or merely for engendering self-deception:

> The primary question [Allen's] film career has dedicated itself to posing … can be stated in remarkably untheoretical terms: Is our preoccupation with films a psychologically healthful indulgence in bracing, reassuring illusions, or is it instead a means of artificially mediating, distorting, or protecting us from lived experience? (Bailey 2001: 23)[35]

Moretti's films also engage what the audiences believe they know about the filmmaker, although the Italian filmmaker generally provides, in interviews, much more stable cues as to what is and isn't autobiographical than Allen does. Moretti does not seem to be all that interested in confounding spectators about the reliability of the tale; the point of the *mise en abyme* in his oeuvre seems first of all to be to unravel, in Brechtian fashion, the autonomy of the fictional world of the films, in a spirit much closer to that identified by Sayad. This is an issue I will take up in the next chapter, and then explore in detail in chapter 6 in relation to Moretti's *The Caiman*.

Sometimes, however, Moretti's demarche seems to backfire, when spectators establish too close an identification between the character in the story and the director's actual self. In his third feature film, *Sweet Dreams*, the fictional protagonist is a young filmmaker who goes about screening his latest work to various audiences, followed by Q&A sessions where the dumb,

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[35] Yacowar has a similar take: "Allen is especially interested in the relationship between art and life. On the one hand, art affords relief from the uncontrollable forces in reality. On the other, our self-conception is obscured by the myths and rhetoric that film and other media inflict upon us" (1991: 5).

trivial, and formulaic nature of the spectators' questions finds its perfect match in the arrogance and self-sufficiency of the (fictional) director's answers. The links between Michele Apicella and the real-life Moretti are deliberately reinforced in minute detail: when Michele visits a small town theatre, for instance, to take part in yet another post-screening debate, the music we hear coming from the loudspeakers, at the close of the projection, is the actual soundtrack that plays over the final credits of Moretti's previous film, *Ecce bombo*.

In the most disparate locations, the same actor (Dario Cantarelli) shows up to represent various spectators who differ in their superficial looks and outfits but always hammer away with the same gripes: that Michele cares only about himself, that his films do not speak to the people (especially the simple, humble folk), that they are useless, "intellectual masturbation"; that the director repeats himself, and that he must change. "It's always the same song: young people, 1968, the school, the family… After your first film one could see you needed to change the tune, but now it's mandatory: man-da-to-ry!" The biographical echoes are clear: these lines parody the criticisms Moretti's previous work had received. They invariably include a social slant, a parodical jab at the director's alleged elitism: "The characters in your films are such nice boys! They don't do drugs, they don't commit suicide, they never travel to India, they don't shoot guns! What kind of life do they have? Who *are* these people?" At a university debate, a lady of patrician manners chastises Michele for "showing only rich villas, with fine books, fine paintings; where are the factory workers amongst these youths?" She provides the pretext for the Cantarelli avatar to re-enter the frame:

> You wanted to make a film about young people, but are young people really like that? *You* are like that! You're only speaking about yourself, about your own personal experience – a rather limited one at that! This film does not represent young people!

"As a matter of fact, I never wanted to represent them," Michele retorts to the Cantarelli character. "I barely represent myself!" The audience laughs, and Michele mimes their laughter, as if he was making fun of the audience

for falling for his own, rather predictable jest. Guido Bonsaver recounts the position taken by the influential far-left activist and film critic Goffredo Fofi:

> In Fofi's view, Moretti had sold the portrait of a minority of "losers" (among whom Fofi listed Moretti himself) as the picture of the entire student movement. "This is not the movement I know," Fofi said. "This is the scum and the refuse, of those who may be part of the movement's crisis, from a generational standpoint, but which are morally peripheral to it."[36] (2001-2002: 162)

In response to critics, Moretti had argued – just like the fictional Michele of *Sweet Dreams* – that *Ecce bombo* had never been meant as the portrait of an entire generation, but of only a tiny fraction of it, the segment Moretti himself belonged to.

Sweet Dreams culminates in a TV contest where two young film directors wrestle with one another in ever more degrading ways, to the public's wild acclaim. Before embarking on one of the laps of this television dispute, Michele cheers himself: "I am cinema, I am the greatest! Mi-che-le! Mi-che-le!" Later on, Moretti comments on this scene:

> When I [Michele] say: 'I'm the greatest, I am cinema!', I am being ironic about my own narcissism, and certainly not extolling it… [Yet] I remember there were two contrasting reactions in the audience which complemented each other, both of them equally absurd. Most people would say: "My gosh, how conceited of him!" But then there were those who said, "It's true, you're right, you really are the greatest." … I felt that kind of reaction to be quite primitive and rather embarrassing.[37]

Moretti candidly expresses frustration at the audience's responses. His complaint suggests that, rather than unravelling the integrity of the diegesis, the *mise en abyme* ended up reinforcing verisimilitude, creating the

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[36] My translation of Fofi's quotes: "Ebbene, questo non è il movimento che io conosco … questa è la scoria e la palude dei generazionalmente partecipi della crisi del movimento, ma moralmente eccentrici al movimento."

[37] "Quand je dis: 'Je suis le plus grand, je suis le cinéma!', j'ironise sur ma mégalomanie, je ne cherche certainement pas à l'exalter. … Je me souviens qu'alors, dans le public, il y a eu deux réactions opposés et complémentaires, toutes deux absurdes. Le plus grand nombre disait: 'Eh, bon sang! Quel prétentieux!' Mais il y avait aussi une minorité que disait: 'C'est sûr, tu as raison, c'est toi le plus grand!' … Je trouve [ce genre de réaction] un peu primitive, [elle] m'embarrassait" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 60).

impression, in the minds of some spectators at least, that *Sweet Dreams* recounted Moretti's *actual* experience at the time, and that Michele's views perfectly coincided with the director's own.

This illusion of transparency – as if the fictional film directly mirrored Moretti's real life, and as if the protagonist's thoughts were the director's own – is a misapprehension. But the way the director opens the above statement goes to the heart of his paradoxical approach: while the first "I" refers to the fictional character, the second one refers to himself, *to the actual person* – and yet the director uses the first person, indifferently, in both instances. He never argues, in Woody Allen fashion, that the fictional protagonist has nothing to do with his own life. He even recounts how he warned his actual mother before she saw *Sweet Dreams* because the scene where Michele beats up *his* mother might conceivably bother her:

> In the violent scene between Michele and his mother, the audience's reaction surprised me and made me uncomfortable. On the opening night, in Venice, spectators would laugh at the scene where I beat up Piera Degli Esposti [who plays Michele's mother in the fiction]. I had to warn my mother – my actual mother – before she went to see the film, in Rome, so that she would be prepared.[38]

Moretti thus acknowledges the kinship between the character and himself, and yet he is *not* suggesting that Michele should be read as a reliable self-portrait. Of the early films, *Sweet Dreams* is the one where the self-representational aspect is most overt, but it is also the one where the protagonist is at his most morose and petulant. On the one hand, Moretti teases us by creating similarities between the fictional creature and himself, while on the other he casts the character in a negative light. In a scene that ostensibly belongs in a film-within-the-film – a musical about the 1968 protests – Moretti satirizes a kind of cinema he disliked. At the same time, the director says (in interviews) that he quite enjoyed shooting said scene,

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[38] "Tout comme la réaction du public pendant la scène de violence entre Michele et sa mère me surprenait et me mettait mal à l'aise. Lors de la première de *Sogni d'oro*, à Venise, les spectateurs riaient en me voyant frapper Piera Degli Esposti. J'ai averti ma mère, ma vraie mère, qui est allée voir le film à Rome, afin qu'elle soit préparée" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 60).

and that Michele's confrontations, in the story, with his rival filmmaker Gigio Cimino (Gigio Morra) should be taken as “a self-critique of my own lonesome snobbery.”[39] *Sweet Dreams* does not simply poke fun at an egomaniac fictional director by the name of Michele: it also pokes fun at Moretti. The actual Moretti wants to be perceived to be there, on the screen, side-by-side, as it were, with the fictional character he embodies in the story. This is a Brechtian idea that plays an important role in Moretti’s filmmaking, as I will try to show in chapters 4 and 6.[40]

The Allen Manoeuvre

Because of the close contiguity between fictional characters and the actual people who embody them in *Husbands and Wives*, some imagined Allen’s film to be directly reflective of real events, while others insisted the two planes be kept strictly separate. Some critics even seemed to hold *both* positions at once: “Matching up fiction and reality is a simple-minded response to art, but” – Caryn James (1992) goes on, undeterred – “watching Woody Allen and Mia Farrow’s relationship crumble on screen is too eerie an experience to ignore.” To my mind, the critic is twice mistaken: we do not need to choose between believing that Judy and Gabe are *merely* characters in the separate realm of the story, or instead having the fictional illusion “shattered” by the realization that the human beings on the screen *are* Farrow and Allen.[41] “Many film theorists hold that this kind of dual attention to both fictional character and (star) performer is an integral feature of our experience of mainstream fiction films,” as Murray Smith points out (2009: 22). *Husbands and Wives* is thus not some sort of a failed fictional story that cannot manage to keep real life at bay; and the spectator who seamlessly moves from seeing Gabe to seeing Allen – who can in effect see both – is not incompetent.

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[39] “Ces duos avec Cimino sont une parodie d’un certain cinéma, mais aussi une autocritique de mon propre snobisme solitaire, un genre de comportement sur lequel j’ironise pour prendre des distances” (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 60).

[40] See the sections “Actors versus characters” (in chapter 4) and “Three ways of staging Berlusconi” (in chapter 6).

[41] Again, my target here is James: “Whenever it seems possible to believe in these fictional characters, some real-life detail intrudes to shatter the illusion,” she writes (1992).

Biographical information about the actors – whether reliable or not – is indeed part of the indispensable context against which to interpret this film. In strictly diegetic terms, *Husbands and Wives* is coherent, self-enclosed: it makes sense. But, in order to work fully, the film presupposes a spectator who is able to interpret it by the light of its actors' biographical legends. A spectator who would *not* be able to see Allen and Farrow on the screen would be missing out on important paratextual elements.

Sobchack's observations on the porosity of the boundary between fictional and nonfictional engagement help us understand how this works. She recounts a scene towards the end of *Husbands and Wives* where Gabe (Allen) makes trenchant observations that could be read as a commentary both on his own – i.e., the fictional character's – conundrum and on Allen's real-life predicament. In the scene, Gabe directly addresses the camera, to respond to an off-screen interviewer. Sobchack describes:

> Asked about the breakup of his marriage and why he didn't tell his wife what was going on much earlier, Gabe replies: "How could I be one hundred percent honest with Judy? I knew that I loved her and I didn't want to hurt her. And so what am I gonna do? What am I gonna say? That I'm becoming infatuated with a twenty-year-old – that I see myself sleepwalking into a mess and I've learned nothing over the last thirty years?" It was, of course, not Gabe but Allen whom we saw saying this within the contemporaneous historical moment. (Sobchack 2004: 278)[42]

The way Allen uses the fictional film to engage with his own biographical legend is intricate. Without explicitly saying so (and in fact denying it: it's a fiction!), he moulds his own legend; or, in Dowd's uncharitable perspective (quoted above), the filmmaker "doctors" his own story. Be it as it may, this does *not* mean that Allen has "erased" the distinction between fiction and actuality – and neither should we.[43] Much the opposite, it is as if he was saying: the character may look like me, share in my tics and quirks, write stories like my own and go through a divorce from a

[42] This scene is echoed in Allen's more recent *Wonder Wheel* (2017). More on this below.

[43] "Relentlessly over the years, Mr. Allen has erased the line between his on-screen and off-screen personas," James incorrectly asserts (*op. cit.*).

woman just like the one I am separating from; yet it isn't me. A few years later, Allen takes the exercise a step further, by having other actors play protagonists who – in their mannerisms, type of humour, and behaviour – still visibly echo his persona, even when they do not physically resemble the director at all.[44] As if to prove that biographical echoes can function just as well in total disregard for the personal circumstances of the actor who happens to play the role, Allen has repeatedly used this strategy in his later films.[45] This can only work, however, to the extent that spectators have learned to see the protagonists of Allen's films as akin to the actual Allen; and the same applies in relation to Moretti's later output – as I will show in detail in chapter 6 in relation to *The Caiman*.[46]

In interviews and other public statements, Allen often uses the very plausibility of his fictional narratives – the fact that they so strongly *seem* to reproduce on the screen who he *actually* is – to rebut biographical reliability. He has done so with *Stardust Memories* (1980), a film avowedly inspired by Fellini's *8½* (1963), where Allen embodies a filmmaker – with a career not unlike his own – who evinces a manifest contempt for his fans. Allen insists that if he shared the protagonist's attitude he would certainly have had the good sense not to display it on screen.[47] *Sweet Dreams* is in a sense Moretti's own variation on *8½* (and it was released the very next year to Allen's film),[48]

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[44] Kenneth Branagh's performance in Allen's *Celebrity* (1998) is a striking example of a fictional protagonist who strongly reminds us of Allen despite the fact that there is no physical resemblance between the two.

[45] Consider the characters of Jerry Falk (Jason Biggs) in *Anything Else* (2003), Boris (Larry David) in *Whatever Works* (2009), Gil (Owen Wilson) in *Midnight in Paris* (2011), Abe Lucas (Joaquin Phoenix) in *Irrational Man* (2015), and several others.

[46] See particularly the section titled "Who is Moretti now?"

[47] "Allen has indicated … that if he had as negative an attitude toward his own film audience as Bates [Sandy Bates, the protagonist of *Stardust Memories*] seems to have, he is savvy enough not to dramatize the fact in a movie" (Bailey 2001: 87).

[48] Just like Guido (Marcello Mastroianni), the protagonist of Fellini's *8½*, Michele Apicella, the fictional filmmaker at the centre of *Sweet Dreams*, looks very much like the actual filmmaker who made *Sweet Dreams* (Moretti). Like Guido, Michele struggles with creative obstacles. The film he is trying to make (in the film) tells the story of a character who in some of his traits clearly resembles himself (that is, the fictional Michele Apicella), and also, more obliquely, the actual filmmaker (Moretti). More importantly, as I have pointed out in the previous section, some characters in *Sweet Dreams* criticize Michele and his films in ways that neatly match the criticisms that Moretti himself had actually received; Fellini had used a similar device in *8½*. (However, in chapter 6 I will argue that *The Caiman* is Moretti's film where the parallel with *8½* is most pertinent. See the section titled "Three Ways of Staging Berlusconi").

with a protagonist Moretti describes as "a nasty, presumptuous, jittery man," a characterization he clearly does not mean to apply to himself.[49] Some years later, Allen would be even more caustic about the lead character in *Deconstructing Harry* (played, once again, by himself): "a nasty, shallow, superficial, sexually obsessed guy," Allen called him, only to immediately add: "I'm sure that everybody will think – I know this going in – that it's me" (Lahr 1996). If "everybody" imagines such characters to be based on the filmmakers' actual selves, that is not an accident, for both Allen and Moretti offer enough similarities between the fictional creatures and themselves that the audience will be led to read the films as possible confessions. In interviews, Allen underlines the nastiness of the protagonist of *Deconstructing Harry*, only to point out this cannot possibly be a self-portrait; but even this conclusion is necessarily provisional, for *Deconstructing Harry* itself depicts a writer who *does project* his actual biographical circumstances in his fictional novels while claiming to do no such thing.[50] Allen raises the question of autobiography only to endlessly defer it.

The British novelist and critic Tim Parks claims this to be a central feature of the skill of writing narrative fiction:

> Writing offers a way of smuggling a message through a taboo, while leaving the taboo intact, threatening to break it – "this is the truth about our marriage" – but not *quite* breaking it – "actually this is only a novel and I don't really think this is the truth about our marriage at all". (2015: 80)

And also:

> Paradoxically, we might say that writing a work of fiction, precisely because it gives the author the chance of denying any relationship between the story and real events, any intended message to those close to him, opens the way to sending far more powerful messages than he might ordinarily be able to or feel was wise. (2015: 17)

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[49] "Dans *Sogni d'oro* – même si par la suite une équivoque a voulu que j'épouse pleinement les données caractérielles du personnage – je mettais en scène un homme méchant, présomptueux, nerveux" (Gili 2017: 27).

[50] As Bailey points out, "a film about an author who literarily cannibalizes his life and heedlessly exploits his friends and lovers for material for fiction constitutes dubious testimony for the incommensurability of life and art" (2001: 3).

The topic of self-representation will therefore not be usefully pursued by trying to find a real-life counterpart beneath every fictional character or event. That would be too static a conception of what self-fictionalization entails. The mistake in understanding artworks as mirroring an author's life – or as a direct symptom of the author's states of mind – is that it discounts the artist's agency. We do not know what was on Allen's mind when, say, he wrote the script for *Deconstructing Harry*, but we can build hypotheses about what he was *aiming to do* with the film. The same applies to the unpleasant features of Moretti's protagonists, to which I will devote significant attention in Part Two of this dissertation. In the spirit sketched out by Jerrold Levinson, the hypotheses we build about filmmakers' intentions must take into account not merely each director's set of personal circumstances, but also the artistic traditions against which the films sets themselves, the filmmaker's overall oeuvre, and wider elements about the social context in which the films emerge (1995: 188).[51]

Excursus: an added complication with the *roman à clef*

To add to the ironies, some critics have suggested that the fictional protagonist of Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* did not in fact represent the filmmaker in an autobiographical manner, but was meant as an unflattering portrait of writer Philip Roth instead.[52] Since Roth and Allen have a number of things in common – they were born two years apart, both in the New York area, both of Jewish descent, and both of them with a penchant for self-fictionalization – a measure of ambiguity subsisted. Meanwhile, Roth is thought to have hit back with the novel *The Humbling* (2009), an episode of which displays eerie similarities with an event Farrow recounts in *What Falls Away*, her 1997 memoir/ exposé about her years with Allen.

The ambiguity regarding the autobiographical nature of *Deconstructing Harry* brings to light a relevant problem: when we read a fictional work as a

[51] See the previous chapter, in particular the section titled: "Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis".

[52] See Carl (1997), Ebert (1997), and Lippert (1998).

roman à clef, how can we be sure the keys we use are the right set?[53] Fictional works can conceivably be *both* autobiographical *and* about someone else. Whereas nonfictional representation requires a one-to-one correspondence between a character in the story and a real-life person, a fictional agent does not need to be tied to a single actual individual: she may very well be inspired by several people, both real and invented. Therefore, Harry Block of *Deconstructing Harry* might have been intended as a fictional stand-in for both the film's director and his supposed nemesis, Philip Roth. In an academic article solely devoted to the issue, Shaun Clarkson raises this possibility, even if he decides against it:

> As vicious as Roth and Allen may intend their attacks on one another, in the public eye the critiques have actually served only to highlight each man's own flaws. *Perhaps this was by design*, with Harry [of *Deconstructing Harry*] and van Buren [of *The Humbling*] *intentionally reflecting the way their creators are perceived*, but I'm more inclined to see the characters as testimony to each artist's refusal to acknowledge or accept his critical and public personae. (2013: 66 – emphasis added)[54]

What I am calling the Allen manoeuvre – raising the possibility that the fiction does echo lived life, and then using the very plausibility of the fictional scenario (the fact that it *looks* like life) to rebut its truthfulness – is central to many of Allen's films. Meanwhile, outside the films, Allen adds to the ambiguity by sharing anecdotes from his life that sound as if they had been plucked from his fictional narratives. To take just one example from Eric Lax's authorized biography of the filmmaker, here is Farrow speaking about Allen (before they split):

> Woody has no tolerance for the country … He's been seen in a beekeeper's hat at my place when it's gnats time. He'll put it on and seriously stroll by the

[53] Roth has his own curious episode in this regard: when Wikipedia stated his novel *The Human Stain* (2000) was based on the life of the writer Anatole Broyard, Roth tried to correct it: it was actually, Roth (2012) said, based on the life of the sociologist Melvin Tumin, a late friend of his. At first, however, Wikipedia did not accept the author's own authority on the matter.

[54] Clarkson believes Allen's film was indeed intended as a jab at Roth: "The initial audience assumption of autobiography in *Deconstructing Harry* is not too far off the mark … but the accumulation of details pointing to Roth's biography and bibliography along with the unlikely love triangle between Allen, Roth, and Farrow ultimately make a more convincing case" (2013: 60). A relevant back-story here is that, according to various sources, Farrow and Roth had a romantic liaison in the mid-1990s, after she and Allen broke up.

> lake in it. Of course, he never goes in the lake. He wouldn't touch the lake. "There are live things in there," he says. (Lax 1991)

Anecdotes of this sort aren't merely biographical: accurate or not, their function is to sustain the legend.[55] The artist divulges information about himself that contributes to the (pseudo) autobiographical effect he strives to achieve in his films.

In the cases of both Roth and Allen, the autobiographical *semblance* of the work is, paradoxically, part and parcel of a *critique* of biographical interpretation – a sort of practical prank meant to show that such interpretations cannot be trusted. "Roth is happiest to explore this autobiographical critique through fiction, mischievously encouraging readers to assume autobiography, even naming some of his protagonists Philip or Philip Roth," writes Clarkson (2013: 67). In Roth's novel *Deception* (1990), the *fictional* narrator and protagonist – who goes by the name of "Philip" – famously states:

> I write fiction and I'm told it's autobiography, I write autobiography and I'm told it's fiction, so since I'm so dim and they're so smart, let them decide what it is or it isn't. (1991 [1990]: 186)

The fact that an artwork invites a biographical engagement must not be treated as license to create a complete mix-up between the fictional and the biographical. Self-representation in fictional works is not autobiography, but rather a form of – often very elaborate – pseudo-autobiography.

Biographical criticism and the passing of moral judgement

Allen's unflinching, unapologetic attitude to self-fictionalization goes on to this day, as – over a quarter-century later – the details and morality of his

[55] It seems interesting to note that the personal trait attributed to Allen in this anecdote directly echoes a passage in Oscar Wilde's "The decay of lying," the seminal essay where the Irish poet and playwright defends the idea – heartily endorsed by Allen – of the complete separateness between life and art. "Nature is so uncomfortable. Grass is hard and dumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects," wrote Wilde (1905 [1891]: 4). It seems possible that by sharing this little tale Allen (through his biographer) was making a nod to Wilde.

separation from Farrow continue to be vigorously debated.[56] Because of both the content of his films and the controversy surrounding them, Allen's case offers a good occasion to probe further into the promise and the perils of biographically-inflected criticism. If biographical interpretation has been treated with caution, if not outright scepticism, it is in part due to the risk of unduly reading into artworks elements that pertain to the biographical sphere, and – in a hasty tendency to find parallels between the fictional and the biographical – end up completely misreading the fictional stories. Conversely, there is also the danger of feeding the fantasy that fictional works tell us what artists are *really* like in their personal capacity.

Both such risks are indeed evident in recent debates around Allen's work; additionally, the controversy surrounding the New York filmmaker includes a heated moral dimension, one that is often conflated with aesthetic appreciation – as if to show appreciation for Allen's films would entail approving the director's attitudes in real life. Therefore, if I am to offer a defence of the pertinence of the biographical angle, I must explain how I think one can avoid falling into similar traps. To reiterate, any form of biographical criticism must take as a starting point the notion that artworks are the intentional products of the artists' minds, and never the automatic, direct mirroring of real events in fictional stories.

The plot of Allen's recent *Wonder Wheel* (2017) once again brings to mind the beginnings of the filmmaker's relationship with Previn. The film features Ginny (Kate Winslet), a woman who once had hopes for an acting career, but is now entering her forties, and finds herself confined by marriage to a man she is bound to by obligation rather than by love. When she meets the younger, dashing Mickey (Justin Timberlake), a graduate student at NYU with aspirations to become a playwright, but also a lifeguard in Coney Island for the duration of the summer, the two swiftly begin a love affair. Into this idyllic scenario enters Carolina (Juno Temple), Ginny's twenty-something

[56] These include the allegation that Allen sexually molested his and Farrow's then 7-year-old daughter, Dylan, around the time of the break-up.

stepdaughter, and Mickey immediately falls in love with her, proceeding to discard the older woman.

Not only does this basic set-up have glaring resonances with the Allen-Farrow-Previn triangle, but Allen goes further, inserting transparent rhymes into the film both with his earlier *Husbands and Wives* and with things he said in public during the break-up with Farrow. When Mickey finds himself in the situation of having to disabuse Ginny of her romantic hopes, he confides directly to the camera, delivering a monologue that is eerily similar to the one Gabe (Allen) had pronounced (also straight to the camera) in *Husbands and Wives*.[57]

> I am not gonna tell Ginny my real feelings – how could I? But I was taken with Carolina. … I'd like to see her again, but obviously I can't be honest with Ginny about that!... The last thing I wanna do is hurt Ginny, or wreck a good thing. Ginny is a very emotional woman. And how could I ever explain things to Carolina? That's all I need! "Hey, I'm having an affair with your stepmother, who's cheating with me on your father…"

What is more, both fictional episodes – the one in *Husbands and Wives* and the one in *Wonder Wheel* – echo Allen's real life self-exculpation when, back in 1992, a journalist asked him why he hadn't let Farrow know of his affair with Previn before she found out about it:

> *Question*: But you didn't tell Mia before it blew up, right?
>
> *Allen*: I wanted to make sure this thing was going to take off. For all I knew I might have just been a little footnote in Soon-Yi's life, and then she would later say, Well, I had a little flirtation with my mother's boyfriend at the end of their relationship. (Isaacson 1992)

Similarly, the dictum Mickey uses to rationalize his preference for Carolina in *Wonder Wheel* – "The heart has its own hieroglyphics" – directly echoes a statement the filmmaker actually made – to great public outcry – in

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[57] Despite the similarity between Mickey's and Gabe's speeches, I think we are not called to sympathize with *Wonder Wheel*'s male lead in the same way we had been called to sympathize with the protagonist of *Husbands and Wives*. This is not the place to expand on the issue, but Mickey has a number of salient negative moral features, and the focus of our allegiance in Allen's later film arguably lies with the female protagonist, Ginny. In her – scathing – review of the film, Manohla Dargis (2017) herself points out that while *Wonder Wheel* is narrated by Mickey, it is Ginny's story.

defence of his relationship with Previn: "The heart wants what it wants," Allen declared in 1992 (Isaacson 1992).[58] The perplexed (and unsympathetic) reviewer at *The New York Times* now asks:

> I tend to think it's a bad idea to put a movie on the couch, but what if it climbs on the couch and then starts winking? … You wonder what Mr. Allen, who has long blurred fact and fiction, thinks he's doing here … Critics have often uneasily ignored his history, but he himself seems perversely intent on invoking it. (Dargis 2017)

The critic explicitly wonders about the filmmaker's intentions, but can only come up with "perversity" as an explanation for the biographical echoes she detects in the film.

There is certainly a daring aspect to the Allen manoeuvre – or a reckless one, depending on where you stand. A crucial part of what fascinates us in films such as *Annie Hall*, *Husbands and Wives*, or *Wonder Wheel* is the way they seem to offer indirect commentary on what we imagine we know about the filmmaker. As a consequence, "For the viewer, speculating about where actuality recedes and fabrication begins is one of the central interpretive pleasures," as Bailey claims (2001: 60). This can only be done if one keeps the biographical aspect in mind. In recent years, critics have felt more and more compelled to discuss Allen's films by the light of the director's personal history. In *The Paris Review*, Claire Dederer (2017) has reassessed her own previous enjoyment of works such as *Manhattan* (1979), reading her own experience of the film as an ethical conundrum. In *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody (2017) manifests "queasiness" in watching Allen's pictures, only to add:

> It is strange and unpleasant to admit that I have found many of them to be substantial experiences – and that much of their power is inseparable from the accusations that have been made against Allen.

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[58] Allen was quoting the 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson, but the allusion went generally unnoticed.

Biographical criticism has never really disappeared from mainstream media, but the issues it raises – particularly on the moral front – are now being discussed with renewed vigour. It is not of course *any* moral shortcomings on the part of Allen which have the power to inflect Brody's appreciation of the work. The problem is the way allegations made against him seem to fit his biographical legend, such as the latter has been construed in the public imagination over decades, both through fictional films and outside them. The films are now scrutinized having in mind what we know, or believe we know, about his private behaviour. "I think *Manhattan* and its pro-girl anti-woman story would be upsetting even if Hurricane Soon-Yi had never made landfall, *but we can't know, and there lies the very heart of the matter*," Dederer pointedly remarks (2017 – my emphasis). Naturally, one could imagine a film just like *Manhattan* without the autobiographical resonances; however, since these are inbuilt in the film, such an artwork would be a completely different object.[59] As intentionalists like to point out, no text can be interpreted merely by reference to "sentence meaning" (or "word sequence meaning"); in order to grasp "utterance meaning," we need to attend to the specific context of the utterance, of which the author's identity is a crucial part.[60] William Tolhurst offers an example:

> Consider the sentence "Nixon is the best president since Lincoln". We could imagine Ron Ziegler [White House Press Secretary during Nixon's presidency] uttering it seriously and thereby asserting that Nixon is the best president since Lincoln. We could also imagine someone who does not share Ziegler's views to have uttered it ironically and thereby to have said something quite different … Since each of these instantiations of the same sentence has a different meaning qua utterance even though the sentence is not ambiguous, it would seem that utterance meaning is distinct from and underdetermined by sentence meaning. (1979: 4)

[59] "As Arthur Danto has famously underlined, for every artwork there could be a perceptually indistinguishable object that is either an artwork entirely different from it in meaning or an object that is not an artwork at all" (Levinson 2016: 21).

[60] The expressions in inverted commas allude to current debates on authorial intention which I have examined in the previous chapter, particularly with reference to William Tolhurst and Jerrold Levinson. See the section "Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis" (in chapter 2).

Other filmmakers could have devised a story like that of *Manhattan*, but Allen's biographical legend is a central ingredient in the 1979 film that exists under that title. As Dederer implies, understanding that particular film requires bearing in mind the full extent of Allen's *persona*.

Similarly to Dederer, Brody (2017) detects continuity between the ideas Allen conveys in his films and the things the filmmaker allegedly ended up doing in actual life. "There has always been something sexually sordid in Allen's work," Brody asserts. "The news, in 1992, of Allen's relationship with Soon-Yi Previn … was, so to speak, a shock but not a surprise: he had expressed his desires in movies." Brody is sophisticated enough not to treat material in fictional films as direct evidence of Allen's behaviour: he is not claiming, say, that for Allen to have expressed, in fictional works, an erotic interest in teenage girls he must have acted on such desires. But the critic does seem to assume that it is possible to infer, from the content of fictional stories, not just an author's ideas, but even his proclivities for action. When Allen is accused of having molested his own, adopted child, Brody examines the films for any symptoms of a sexual sickness. Inspecting Allen's earlier work by the light of allegations that were made later, he reads into *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989) "an anticipatory confession *not so much to actual crimes as to tormenting impulses*" (emphasis added).

> It's a … film that evokes an unstable, agonizing tension regarding evil desires and anticipation of evil deeds, and the intensity of this guilt and torment has marked Allen's films ever since.

The concept of an "anticipatory confession" has a literary pedigree: Oscar Wilde famously claimed that art does not imitate life, but it is rather life that imitates art. Ironically, the point the Irish playwright was trying to make was precisely the opposite of Brody's. Wilde insisted on the primacy of the writer's unfettered imagination to create stories that people go on to emulate, as he was trying to counter the conflation between the thoughts expressed in an artwork and the life of the artist behind it. In his view, artists do not replicate what they have seen or lived, but instead make up

things that others then imitate. In a passage in "The decay of lying", the Irish playwright retells the story of a woman who closely modelled herself – to her own detriment – after a fictional character she had read about in a serial:

> She told me that she had felt an absolutely irresistible impulse to follow the heroine step by step in her strange and fatal progress, and that it was with a feeling of real terror that she had looked forward to the last few chapters of the story. When they appeared, it seemed to her that she was compelled to reproduce them in life, and she did so. It was a most clear example of this imitative instinct of which I was speaking, and an extremely tragic one. (Wilde 1905 [1891]: 39)[61]

In parallel fashion, Brody implies Allen's films provide a schema that the director – possibly impelled by obscure mental forces beyond his own control – would have gone on to carry out in his actual life. Brody's argument contains a misstep, however. The critic assumes continuity between the fictional work and the fictionist's mental universe, but instead of merely discussing the films by reference to what he thinks he knows about Allen, he discusses *the director and the allegations made against the director* by the light of his interpretation of the films. His vocabulary (Brody not only identifies "evil desires", but also the "anticipation of evil *deeds*", and the subsequent "guilt and torment") is expressive of a moral evaluation of *the artist* by way of the art. This is a mistake, for the critic's preoccupation has to be with the artworks: mind reading is neither his speciality nor his business. In this connection, it is pertinent to insist that we are often unable to decide whether an artist actually *believes* in the ideas she expresses in an artwork. A hypothetical intentionalist like Levinson puts it thus: "In many … cases … we will be unable to decide whether a view we discern in a work is indeed plausibly attributed to its maker as held, rather than merely considered, explored, or tried out for size" (1995: 188). And the fact that we cannot

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[61] One should not assume the tale to be authentic. Wilde's essay assumes the form of a dialogue between two fictional persons, Cyril and Vivian. It is Vivian who speaks in this passage. He goes on to describe his friend as having "no personality at all, but simply the possibility of many types ... She abandoned religion for mesmerism, mesmerism for politics, and politics for thematic excitements of philanthropy. In fact, she was a kind of Proteus" (1905 [1891]: 37-38). Such a characterization closely matches the protagonist of Allen's *Zelig*, and it wouldn't be surprising if one were to find out the passage in question served as inspiration for Allen's film.

determine this is just fine, for whereas in everyday communication our goal is to track down the actual thoughts of the person who is expressing them ("utterer's meaning"), in art the agent's ultimate beliefs matter less, for our focus are the meanings expressed *in the artwork* ("utterance meaning").[62]

Now and again, Brody backtracks from reading too hastily into the person the musings and emotions he discovers in the films: "Of course, the recognition of evil feelings and impulses isn't the sole dominion of criminals," he concedes. But since he believes the criminal allegations made against Allen are true – something he takes good care to state early in his piece – he cannot help but conclude that the reason why Allen is so good at articulating guilt is because he feels it. The work is not direct evidence of Allen's extrafilmic behaviour, but Brody interprets it in a way that *confirms* a prior, as it were independently established, suspicion. However, since there is no correlation between entertaining unwholesome thoughts and the practice of crimes, the corroboration of suspicions about the latter through clues collected from the former is fallacious. Wilde, for one, pointed out that the business of artworks is not to tell the truth: "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (1905 [1891]: 55). Literature alters facts in order to cast reality under a different light.

There is an element of mind-reading in Brody's style of criticism, which, at its worst, becomes a form of thought policing. In *The Washington Post*, Richard Morgan (2018) reports from having gone through Allen's papers (collected at Princeton University), and claims to have found evidence of the director's sick, nay criminal "obsession" with teenage girls. Some of Morgan's formulations are so crass as to sound almost like parody: "All art is partly autobiographical," he asserts. "It comes from inside someone's mind, inside their soul. Allen's archive shows what is inside his." Morgan discusses events in fictional stories by the light of criminal law, directly attributing characters' ideas and actions to the writer. When a fictional 53-year-old man offers to buy a drink for a 17-year-old girl he has seen in an elevator, Morgan signals that

[62] See my discussion of "Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis" in the previous chapter.

"at any time in Allen's life it would've been illegal for a grown man to offer a 17-year-old a martini." This literal style of interpretation is perhaps too crude to be taken seriously; then again, I wonder if there is a logical difference between such an example and Dederer's observations about *Manhattan* in *The Paris Review*. Referring to the romantic relationship between the 40-something protagonist Isaac (Allen) and the 17 year-old Tracy (Mariel Hemingway), Dederer (2017) points out: "The really astonishing thing about watching this … is its nonchalance. NBD [No Big Deal], I'm fucking a high schooler." Morgan makes a similar argument about the same film, one which he reinforces by pointing to the indexical nature of the photographic image: when the fictional Isaac kisses the fictional Tracy, we know that 43-year-old Woody Allen must have kissed the 16 year-old Mariel Hemingway, just as surely as we know that for a rabbit to be killed in the fictional *Rules of the Game* an actual rabbit had to be shot. Again, Morgan claims he has detected a crime:

> This is a man who, at 43, awarded himself 16-year-old Hemingway's first kiss — the actress's herself, not her character's – on the set of *Manhattan*. (Afterward, she recalled in a talk show interview, she ran over to cinematographer Gordon Willis and cried, "I don't have to do that again, do I?") He is dressing up crime as art.

There is a sense in which biographical criticism feels not like something that illuminates the work, but as something which casts a shadow over it, like a cumbersome intrusion. Against this, there is still much to be commended in T. S. Eliot's words, written over a hundred years ago, in the seminal essay where he tried to uncouple the feelings expressed in art from the emotions the artist may or may not have actually experienced.[63] "Great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatsoever," Eliot plausibly argued (1934 [1913]: 18).

[63] Eliot was building on an illustrious predecessor: over two decades earlier, Oscar Wilde had claimed "Art never expresses anything but itself" (1905 [1891]: 53).

> Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man. (1934 [1913]: 20)

Since it is perfectly possible to express thoughts and emotions that one does not actually endorse, to use artworks for making inferences about an artist's deeper mental states is extremely risky business, and I side with Levinson in thinking we should refrain from the exercise. In chapter 6, I will consider this problem with a practical case in mind, when discussing the third – autobiographical, nonfictional – segment of Moretti's *Dear Diary* (1993) and its relation to the first segment of the same film.[64]

Dederer and Morgan find it puzzling – nay indecent – that actions that would normally be met with condemnation if they were to occur in everyday life should be treated with sympathy (or even elicit praise) when they take place in the story-world of Allen's fictional works. The two critics seem to lose from view that our assessment of fictional characters, while still containing a moral dimension, does not simply and straightforwardly follow the same standards we apply in our day-to-day. To an extent, we enjoy characters such as those Allen or Moretti play on the screen because they dramatize ideas or feelings that would not be condoned in everyday life: we like them (if we like them at all) not despite their faults, but because of them. Additionally, even when we do not find fictional persons to be likeable in any simple sense, we sometimes find them to be so complex and illuminating as to repay our interest in them.

This is an issue Smith has examined in several of his writings over the years. Appraising the spectatorial relation entertained with the fictional mafia boss who is the lead character in the TV series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), Smith describes a scene where Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) metes out retribution on a medical doctor who had wronged him. According to Smith, it is not as if spectators were indifferent to the moral content of the fictional scene depicted; much to the contrary, the episode crucially relies on

[64] See the section titled "Intimations of Mortality".

the spectators' moral sense, for an important part of what is at stake in this scene is the injustice Soprano suffered at the hands of an arrogant professional, an aggravation that can easily muster our sympathy. Meanwhile, the appeal of the scene also lies in the moral transgression, i.e., in the fact that Soprano can get away with things that our sense of morality (aside from any other practical matters) would prevent us from doing:

> When Soprano and Furio [Federico Castellucio] threaten Kennedy [Sam McMurray] on the golf course, pushing him back into the edge of a river and knocking his cap off, we are not led to condemn this action. Instead, the show, on this occasion, allows us to enjoy the humbling of Kennedy by Soprano. An important part of the pleasure we take in the scene, I submit, consists in imagining acting transgressively, but with impunity, as Soprano does. (Smith 2011: 78-79)

In a more recent piece, Smith evokes a BBC Radio show, in 2014, where fictional characters talked to actual journalists as if they were all part of the same, real-life universe. Referring to a conversation between the fictional Lynda Snell (Carole Boyd), a character from the radio soap opera *The Archers* (1950-), and the BBC journalist Anita Anand, Smith notes: "If we didn't instantly recognize Lynda Snell for the character she is – or at least that she is a character – as she harangues Anita Anand, chances are we'd be irritated rather than amused" (2019: xii). In chapter 5 I will discuss the fictional protagonist of Moretti's *Palombella rossa* with this idea in mind, particularly with reference to a scene where Michele Apicella smacks an annoying journalist across the face.[65] Amongst other things, the scene can be construed as funny, in a way that its counterpart in the real world would most likely not be.[66]

Nevertheless, when the fictional shades into the biographical there is a risk that the distinction between everyday ethical judgement and aesthetic appreciation may also collapse. Smith himself acknowledges that the appeal of transgressive characters "is likely to be much more salient and powerful in

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[65] See in particular the section titled "The rhetorical strategy".

[66] Similarly, Smith notes: "Contemplating the actions of Soprano in the imagination simply is not the same, in all respects, as encountering the actions of a real equivalent to Soprano" (2011: 80).

the context of fictional engagement, where the imagined pleasures and benefits of such behavior do not have to be set against real costs" (2011: 80).[67] Were we to learn that Moretti *himself* had acted violently towards a woman, our engagement with Michele Apicella, the fictional protagonist of *Palombella rossa*, might also be affected.

Indeed, the recent case of the American sitcom *Roseanne* (1987-1997, 2018), also cited by Smith (2019: xiii-xiv), gives credence to this hunch. The TV show plays on the affinities between the fictional title-character and the actor who embodies her – not least in the fact that both the fictional Roseanne Conner and the real-life Roseanne Barr are Trump supporters. In the end, it was the *actor's* political ideas (as conveyed on Twitter) which prompted the TV channel ABC to cancel the show. The episode suggests that when a person's actual features match *too closely* those of a fictional creature, these stop being perceived as a funny caricature; in such cases, it is not only our assessment of the actual person that suffers, but also our engagement with the fictional character.

The fact that Brody believes a number of unpleasant things about the flesh and blood Woody Allen inflects his appreciation of the fictional protagonists of Allen's films, in a way that is analogous to Roseanne Barr's example. However, there is a twist to Brody's argument. When unsavoury facts are revealed about an artist, the most common way of thinking about these is to see them as hindering our ability to engage with the artwork on "its merits." Interestingly, though, Brody turns this assumption on its head. In his view, Allen's moral shortcomings do not diminish but rather *enrich* his appreciation for Allen's recent output. Moral quandaries are often at the centre of Allen's narrative fictions, and their protagonists flaunt their imperfections. Interpreting the films through a biographical lens, Brody sees

[67] In a related manner, the distinction between documentaries and fictional films is generally thought of as having an ethical component: Sobchack, for one, claims that documentaries typically raise ethical and existential questions which do not apply in fiction, and that is why the realization that a rabbit had actually been killed in the filming of *The Rules of the Game* "transformed" – in her experience – "fictional into documentary space" (2004: 269). See the section titled "Sobchack: Biographical echoes and spectatorial engagement," above.

Allen's personal flaws as the constant, latent theme of the director's oeuvre in the past two and a half decades:

> The story of [*Celebrity*] is essentially the destructive force of desire on the work and the life of a serious artist – and it ends with a literal, cosmic call for help … In *Hollywood Ending*, Allen plays a director stricken with the Oedipal punishment of blindness – and whose cure involves reconciliation with his estranged son and ex-wife … Predominant emotions and ideas [in Allen's later films] involve self-loathing, self-destruction, and guilt.

Differently from many critics, Brody does not see Allen's films themselves as immoral; on the contrary, in his view they are more moral, at least in the concerns they articulate, than Allen himself (in his extracinematic statements and behaviour).[68] In fictions which strongly resonate with the director's biographical record, Allen does not merely shape the facts in a way that suits his interests, but rather shows sympathy towards his victims, something that is lacking in his public statements. In Brody's interpretation, in the films Allen goes so far as to indict himself:

> It's worth observing and lamenting the litany of victims in Allen's work – the Carolinas and the Nolas,[69] the mistresses and the wives, the girls getting undue attention and the lost, troubled boys. It's a distressing measure of Allen's achievement that his films are a record of their experience, as well – another measure of the inseparability of the artist and the art.

In this view, Allen's films seriously engage with the moral problems the director is personally accused of.[70] While – in Brody's account – the films do speak to the director's personal flaws, they need not be taken to mirror, and much less celebrate, such flaws. Instead, the artworks explore such issues with a complexity and even a degree of morality that may not be present in the artist's real actions, to the point that, in the fictional stories, those who suffer at the hands of an Allen-like figure get a voice, while the

[68] Taking the opposite view, Manohla Dargis (2017) calls *Wonder Wheel* "one of [Allen's] more unfortunate contributions to cinema" on account of its echoes with the director's personal life.

[69] Carolina (Juno Temple) and Nola (Scarlett Johansson) are the erotic interests of the male protagonists of, respectively, *Wonder Wheel* and *Match Point* (2005). Both of them are harmed by the men they fall in love with, and end up meeting tragic fates.

[70] This hypothesis seems to be strengthened by the example of Rain's eloquent criticism of Gabe, in *Husbands and Wives*, quoted above.

actions of the filmmaker's fictional surrogate are deplored. Shallow biographical interpretations tend to assume that artworks must confirm the views their authors express in their day-to-day lives, but Brody offers a fine example of how reading films by the light of their director's personal history can produce results that are anything but redundant. While I think the critic is wrong to use the films as reliable evidence to pass judgment on the real-life Allen, Brody gives us a most intriguing interpretation of the films drawing on the filmmaker's biographical legend – that is, on what he imagines he knows about Allen. Naturally, the soundness of Brody's reading is contingent upon the solidity of his assumptions about the flesh and blood Allen – but this is always the case when we rely on context to make sense of an artwork. If we misapprehend the context, we are bound to misinterpret the work.

On the other hand, it is worth bearing in mind that artworks may sometimes be good because of their ethical imperfections, at least to the extent that they allow us to engage with unseemly thoughts and feelings in the protected sphere of fiction. The idea that an artwork may be richer because of the inappropriate ideas it propounds is an instance of what Smith calls "the allure of the transgressive" (2011: 84). The very fact that we are tempted to partake in emotions we would not usually condone (in our day-to-day) may be a crucial part of what the artwork does for us. Even a proponent of "ethicism" – the view that ethical assessment is *integral* to the appreciation of art – such as Berys Gaut admits that "works can be good precisely *because* they violate our sense of moral rectitude. Often the most fascinating characters in works are the evil ones" (1998: 188 – emphasis in the original).[71] Moreover, Gaut calls attention to the fact that an artwork can articulate ideas or feelings without necessarily endorsing them. Humbert Humbert, the fictional protagonist and narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), expresses a questionable moral outlook, but it would be wrong to interpret

[71] According to ethicists, when we judge the artwork to be defective from a moral standpoint, that will count against it *as an artwork*: we will deem it to be a lesser work. However, to say that moral assessment is integral to art appreciation is not to say that art appreciation can be *subsumed* into ethical appraisal. We can indeed enjoy artworks whose morality we disapprove of, for we *also* assess other features that have little to do with morality. "There are a plurality of aesthetic values, of which the ethical values of artworks are but a single kind," Gaut clarifies (1998: 183).

the novel itself as endorsing the character's views.[72] Similarly, a careful examination of Allen's *Manhattan* suggests that its protagonist, Isaac Davis, is an unreliable narrator, and not the heroic figure he is sometimes made out to be. Looking closely at the film as a story framed within another story, Michael Smith convincingly makes this argument:

> From the very beginning of the movie, it has been clear that the story is told from Isaac's point of view. But if Isaac is a narcissist, then that point of view is unreliable … On this unreliable narrator reading of the movie, the only thing we know for sure about *Manhattan* is that, according to the movie, in "real life" Isaac is a narcissist and statutory rapist … The earlier reading of the movie according to which Isaac only wrongs Tracy in limited and ultimately forgivable ways, ways that leave his basic trustworthiness intact, is itself just a story within a story … The story within a story is, however, pure fantasy, a fantasy that Isaac is almost certainly incapable of recognizing. (2015: 20-21)

This interpretation calls attention to the fact that, in the very first scene of *Manhattan*, the protagonist tells us about the fictional story he is writing. The tale we will be told from that point onwards is that story. Its protagonist is a fictional creature who looks just like Isaac Davis, that is, the narrator who introduces the story, but this does not make it a reliable account of Davis' life. The relation between the protagonist of this story (the tale that is told in the film) and its narrator (the one who introduces the story) therefore doubles the relation between Isaac Davis and Woody Allen, the film's author. *Manhattan* is a *mise-en-abyme*, a perfect sequence of Russian dolls.

Therefore, if we take Allen's films as straightforward celebrations of characters and romantic relationships which in the end we find objectionable, that may conceivably say more about our own preferences than about the films (let alone about the filmmaker personally). In a spirit of soul-searching, a number of critics have recently felt compelled to probe their own previous engagement with Allen's films. Besides Dederer, *The New York Times*' film

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[72] "It is important to distinguish between the evil or insensitive characters represented by a work and the attitude the work displays towards those characters … Satan [in Milton's *Paradise Lost*] is indeed fascinating because evil, but the work represents him as such, showing the seductive power of evil, and does not approve of his actions. Milton was not a Satanist" (Gaut 1998: 188).

critic A. O. Scott considers not *the* Woody Allen problem, but "*my* Woody Allen problem", to indicate his willingness to challenge the moral complacency he now believes he used to unduly extend to the films and their author: "Mr. Allen's films and writings are a part of the common artistic record, which is another way of saying that they inform the memories and experiences of a great many people. I don't mean this as a defence, but an acknowledgment of betrayal and shame," Scott writes (2018). In the online magazine *Jewish Currents*, David Klion (2018) dwells on his need to "unlearn" what the New York filmmaker would supposedly have taught him:

> Renouncing Woody Allen is painful for many of us not just because we enjoy his work, but because it feels like renouncing a part of ourselves. It also feels cheap, because there's no point in renouncing him if we can't also renounce the part of us that finds his characters relatable. We need to take a closer look at the films that taught us to be this way … We shouldn't be wincing at Allen. We should be wincing at ourselves, at all we've learned and all we're only beginning to unlearn.

Pieces like these adopt a tone of self-reckoning. By quoting them, I would not want to imply that I share in their interpretation of Allen's films. On the contrary: I would argue that, in the hurry to atone for their own perceived moral faults, these critics read the films too narrowly, with insufficient awareness of nuance. The fact that many of these pieces adopt a preachy and self-righteous tone should indeed keep one alert to the dangers of treating biographical criticism as a license to establish misguided equivalencies between characters in fictional stories and their real-life creators.

With this in mind, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, I interrogate the biographical angle for making sense of Moretti's protagonists in films like *Ecce bombo, Palombella rossa*, and *The Caiman*. As the quote that opens this chapter – as an epigraph – implies, a crucial part of Moretti's cinematic project consists in the creation of fictional characters who, just as they are autobiographically inspired, also have serious, even fundamental flaws, traits from which the filmmaker wants to *distance* himself. Certainly the views

expressed by fictional characters in Moretti's films cannot be immediately attributed to the filmmaker; and yet the flesh and blood Moretti and his actual views are a crucial frame of reference for making sense of what goes on in the fictional films. In Moretti's work, the autobiographical semblance of the protagonist is sometimes used to implicate the actual director in those flaws he wants to *condemn* – an idea Millicent Marcus has deployed with reference to the protagonist of *Palombella rossa* with the concept of "complicitous critique".[73] The project of creating a fictional character who both stands for the director himself and for features he wants to *criticize* takes its most radical form in the final few minutes of *The Caiman*, with the emergence of a fictional figure who is meant to *simultaneously* represent Moretti and Berlusconi, a political personality the filmmaker loathes. In this case, it is as if the Italian filmmaker turned the Allen manoeuvre upside down, hinting, in a subtle manner, that a figure who on the surface looks nothing like himself does, at bottom, share something with him. In chapter 6 I will have the occasion to analyse *The Caiman* in detail.

Conclusion: A Skill, Not A Mirror

Fictional narratives, such as novels or motion pictures, do not passively mirror their authors' lives, as if the truth about actual events were to be gleaned directly from artworks, or (conversely) as if the meaning of the latter were to transparently reside in the details of a life. One of the most seductive aspects of Park's defence of biographical criticism is that he sees writing as a *skill*, a tool at the writer's disposal, and the work as the result of conscious action. He is interested in the ways fiction writing is *functional* to the writer. Commenting on the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Parks makes the following observation:

> Critics constantly ask where Hardy's pessimism comes from … Perhaps it would be more useful to ask, where was the pessimism *taking him*, what would be the effect of such grim stories on the dynamic of his life? Pessimism

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[73] See chapter 5, particularly the section "The rhetorical strategy".

> is perhaps more comprehensible as a tool than as a credo. (2015: 131 – emphasis in the original)

Biographical interpretation is not the same thing as a desire for correlative truth, not the same as trying to establish an actual character or event behind each fictional one. What Parks proposes is that we understand the work as produced by the same person who lived, as part of her way of "dealing with the world". "A book is a real event," Parks says (2015: 109), a consequential affair which generally involves a lot of thinking, on the part of the author, about how it might affect her life: her material conditions, her social standing, her personal relationships. Not only does the novelist's imagination necessarily stem from her actual existence in one way or another, but the fictional narrative itself will have practical consequences:

> Imagination works on material that is available. Then, like it or not, when an author tells a story, even if set in some fantasy world, it will be *assumed* he is talking about, or alluding to the society he lives in, and quite possibly the people he knows. And the way that society and those people are talked about, or *believe* they are being talked about, will establish, perhaps transform, the author's relation to them. (Parks 2015: 14 – emphases in the original.)

Moretti alludes to this phenomenon in his own work. He explains his decision to postpone the shooting of *The Son's Room* – a fictional story about a psychoanalyst whose teenage son dies in a diving accident – because he was about to become a father, and the project seemed unsuited to his personal circumstances. He also recounts, as we have seen, the time he warned his own mother about the scene in *Sweet Dreams* where the fictional protagonist has a physical brawl with *his* mother.

A theory of biographical criticism does not depend on the assumption that artworks are directly expressive of emotions actually felt. Works can accord primarily with generic practice. "Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions," Oscar Wilde wrote (1905 [1891]: 54), alluding to the way artworks always depend, to a greater or lesser extent, on the rules that are operative in an artistic field. For Eliot, the

extent the artwork manages to speak to circumstances very different from the author's own is a measure of its excellence. This is the idealistic notion – still very much current – that "true" art is the one that endures by somehow transcending its historical circumstances:

> The mind of the poet … may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (Eliot 1934 [1913]: 18)[74]

Eliot furthermore asserts that the digestion and transmutation of lived experience required by art is such that the real-life incidents that give rise to it become practically irrelevant. With a knack for hyperbole and paradox, he goes on to write:

> It is not in his personal emotions … that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting … The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them into poetry, to express feelings which are *not in actual emotions at all*. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. (Eliot 1934 [1913]: 20-21 – emphasis added)

The precise form in which the work stands to an author's life is bound to be different in each case. Life and fiction need not be similar: what the two need to be is *related*. As Parks points out, it is "often interesting to consider events in the author's life besides similar events in his or her novels precisely to savour the transformation that has occurred" (2015: 14). By working on life's raw materials, artworks generally modify them. And yet, even when the expressive aspect of art is less relevant, the work still maintains a link to its author: it still means something for the author in terms of what she was trying to do. The Norwegian novelist Per Petterson (*b.* 1952) defines the relationship between the protagonist of many of his novels and himself in the following way: "He's not my alter ego, he's my stuntman. Things happen to

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[74] And also: "The bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot 1934 [1913]: 21).

him that could have happened to me, but didn't" (Campbell 2009).[75] In a similar manner, Moretti has claimed that the self-representational aspect of his films helps him to "exorcise" some of his traits – to push them *away*. The statement is a perfect demonstration of what Parks calls "a survival skill", for – by the filmmaker's own account – one of the reasons why he endows fictional characters with autobiographical attributes is to achieve a personal, even a psychological, goal.

One could argue there is nothing strikingly original about my method – about the way, in the upcoming chapters, I deploy Moretti's statements in interviews and his biographical circumstances to make sense of the films. Film criticism that is grounded in a filmmaker's opinions and/or in her biographical circumstances is exceedingly common. What is generally lacking, however, is an interrogation of the theoretical grounds on which such approaches rely. In light of recent controversies with respect to Allen, and the many misconceptions it has given rise to, I would argue that such a task is not only timely but indeed urgent. In Moretti's work (as in Allen's) the biographical can be thought of as a paratext, in the strict sense of being a framework the filmmaker intentionally brings to bear on the films. This means we do not have the option of ignoring biographical echoes, though we still need a theoretically sound way of making sense of them. The alternative to the establishment of a hard barrier between the artwork and the biographical author (which many critics accept when they claim that artists' lives are irrelevant to the discussion of art) should not be the creation of a mishmash where those aspects that pertain to the artwork and those which belong to the artist's life can be indifferently assembled.

To compare Moretti with Allen obviously does not entail the assumption that the two filmmakers are alike in every way. The particulars of the questions brought up in recent controversies about Allen – the way the New York filmmaker's biographical legend has become not just overshadowed but outright dominated by allegations of sexual improprieties (and even

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[75] Parks quotes Petterson (2015: 97).

crimes) – do not apply to the Italian director. But comparisons do not merely cast light on the ways two cases are alike: they also help us see the ways in which they differ, and therefore help to bring to the fore the specifics of Moretti's *demarche*. As I have already hinted, and will develop in the following chapters, the rationale for the autobiographical echoes Moretti inserts in his films is for the most part quite different from that which motivates Allen.

Finally, as I hope is clear from the arguments presented in this chapter, my defence of biographical criticism must not be taken to imply that biography is the sole, or primary, relevant angle for appreciating artworks: over the next few chapters, I will bring in a number of other factors, notably aesthetic frameworks and historical – specifically political – contexts that are crucial for making sense of what goes on in the films. Biographical information and authorial intention are two of the tools at the critic's disposal. An excessive concern with the personal aspect may even, in some cases, side-track our appreciation for the artworks. However, this is something that needs to be assessed in practice, by comparing the insights different kinds of information offer, and not by dismissing authorial intention or the biographical angle out of hand at the start of critical proceedings. Now let us see what light these theoretical premises cast on the films.

Part 2
Film analysis

Chapter 4: **Early Moretti (on *Ecce bombo*)**

> The hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is … that it is a product of *defeat*. ... Its major works were, without exception, produced in situations of political isolation.
> (Anderson 1979 [1976]: 42 – emphasis in the original)

Introduction

Nanni Moretti is, and has been for some three decades, an established name not just in Italian but also in European cinema more broadly. His reputation has been cemented at the most prestigious international film festivals: he was first awarded a Special Jury Prize at Venice, for *Sweet Dreams* (1981), then the Silver Bear in Berlin, with *The Mass is Ended* (1985), and finally he was acclaimed at Cannes, with best director (*Dear Diary*, 1993) and ultimately the Palme d'Or (*The Son's Room*, 2001). However, should the spectator of later films wish to go back and inspect Moretti's earliest works, she would be bound to encounter difficulties. The main purpose of this chapter is to make the task of this putative viewer easier, by identifying the aesthetic norms against which the early films can be comprehended, as well as the historical context they self-consciously address. My purpose is to retrieve the meaning of Moretti's films, with a particular focus on *Ecce bombo* (1978), as "a-text-as-indicated-in-a-context," to borrow Jerrold Levinson's expression (1996: 195). That requires grasping these works against the appropriate set of aesthetic traditions, by the light of their historical circumstances, and as the product of a particular human being, with certain goals and beliefs. The author manifests himself not only through his other films but also in his extracinematic statements, in interviews and the like.[1]

In the first half of the chapter, I strive to show that Moretti conducts an implicit dialogue with two aesthetic frameworks which go a long way

[1] I am working from a contextualist position that draws particularly on the work of Jerrold Levinson and David Bordwell. See my discussion in chapter 2 (above), especially the sections titled "Biographical legend and historical context" and "Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis."

towards illuminating what goes on in the films: these are “art cinema” and Brechtianism. I then turn my attention to the historical context of these films, with a particular concern for its political dimension, in an attempt to show how these works not simply emerge from a set of historical circumstances, but more specifically *speak to* a particular moment in Italian political history. My analysis throughout draws on biographical aspects, not only on the assumption that the films are the inseparable product of a particular human being, but because Moretti’s works repeatedly bring to the fore what spectators are expected to know about the filmmaker’s biography. Sometimes, this self-representation confirms our prior knowledge about the actual Moretti – for instance, the central character’s political views or cinematic tastes invariably match the filmmaker’s actual views and tastes, as expressed in interviews. At other times, however, the films ironically confound the audience’s expectations, often leaving one without a firm footing for evaluating the attitudes adopted by the fictional persons on the screen – most of all, the ones espoused by the protagonist, whom the director himself embodies. As I have been insisting, to take stock of the biographical does not entail seeing what fictional characters say and do as directly mirroring the filmmaker’s real-life opinions and experiences. Towards the end of this chapter, the analysis of *Ecce bombo* aims to bring out the complexity of the relationship between the fictional and the biographical in the film.

Amongst Moretti’s early works I have decided to concentrate on *Ecce bombo*, the one that turned its director into a household name, not just in Italy but also in France. *Ecce bombo* is the second of Moretti’s feature films, and also the second in a series of pictures that are centred on a character that goes by the name of Michele Apicella. This ensemble has to be kept in view. Not only did Moretti take the roles of director, lead actor, and sole screenwriter in his first three films, but several hints – both internal to the fictions and external to them – suggest that the character(s) he embodies is autobiographical.

The main strands of *Ecce bombo* turn around Michele: scenes depicting the protagonist’s relations with his family (father, mother, and sister); those

featuring his "male consciousness-raising" group (Mirko, Vito, Goffredo, and Cesare); and the ones featuring women he is more or less romantically attached to (Silvia, Flaminia, and Cristina). Such scenes form narrative clusters that are by and large coherent, and where some measure of dramatic development occurs. Meanwhile, interspersed throughout the film, we find other elements – scenes featuring a TV reporter, a radio station, and a music festival – that can hardly be integrated with the rest of the story, either chronologically or in terms of causality. While all strands of *Ecce bombo* are best understood as commentary on a particular historical situation, topicality is most crucial to these latter segments, which can hardly be comprehended at all without reference to particular events taking place in Italy at the time the film was made.

At several moments scattered throughout the film, we see characters – who play no other role in the story, have no visible link to the protagonist, and are not identified by name – calling a radio program, and being put on air to say whatever they please. One of them (played by the director's father, Luigi Moretti) declaims poetry, whereas another one returns again and again to embark on a barely comprehensible ramble. In the context of the film's initial release, there was nothing opaque to these scenes: they made direct, satirical commentary on the so-called "free radios" movement, a network of non-commercial radio stations that popped up in Italy in the mid-1970s as a utopian experiment in self-expression.[2] Another topical nod in *Ecce bombo* is the rock festival Michele attends in his lonely summer in town, which alludes – again, in farcical terms – to the counter-cultural celebrations the *Re Nudo* magazine organized twice, in 1974 and 1976, at Park Lambro, in Milan.

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[2] The boom of the Italian free radios occurred as a response to a Constitutional Court ruling, in July 1975, declaring the state monopoly of the airwaves to be illegal; ironically, this very decision would pave the way for the creation of private television channels that in due time took up an oligopolistic position in the sector. The idea that the radio would perform a radically egalitarian role goes back several decades. In a newspaper article in 1932, Bertolt Brecht described his vision for the social role the medium could perform: "Radio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers" (Brecht 1964: 52). In hindsight, it is also hard to read these lines and not be reminded of the very similar terms in which the internet's possibilities were imagined in the 1990s.

Referential meanings are by definition hard to recreate from a distance (be it in time or in space). Beyond the specificity of its historical elements, however, *Ecce bombo* raises other obstacles to interpretation. *Non sequitur* abound, both at the level of what characters say and in terms of the overall architecture of the film. The storyline is thin, and new characters are constantly introduced, many of them with no context to explain who they are or what they do – to the point that this complicates the basic task of character recognition.[3] Even in the very final sequence new figures are brought in, with no specific hints to help us figure out who they are or what function they are meant to fulfil.[4] The film's very title remains shrouded in mysteries, and attempts at translating it have resulted in egregious blunders.

Nonetheless, on its initial release *Ecce bombo* was both a critical and a commercial success. What is more, some of its lines became so famous that over forty years later they are still routinely evoked in informal conversation as in public discourse. In an early scene, Michele hesitates on whether he should attend a party: "Will I be more noticed if I come and stay at a remove, or if I don't come at all?" The line has become a recurrent title of newspaper articles, a cynical angle to analyse political tactics.[5] At a later point, in a conversation with Cristina (Cristina Manni), Michele asks her what she does for a living: "I do stuff, I see people…," she vaguely retorts, a phrase that was initially an allusion to the anti-work ethos of the 1977 movement, but which is now a more general, self-deprecating way of indicating that one has no clear goals in life. "*Faccio cose, vedo gente*" is currently the name of a restaurant in Milan – and also the title of a recent book about famous movie

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[3] According to Murray Smith, "recognition" consists in the ability to perceive a fictional agent as "individuated" and "continuous", i.e., analogous to a person. It is the first, essential task the spectator has to perform if she is to engage with the character on an emotional level. Smith organizes character engagement in a "structure of sympathy" that also comprises "alignment" (the extent to which we are granted access to a character's actions, thoughts, and feelings) and allegiance (the way we are invited to positively evaluate the character). For a map outlining this conceptual scheme, see Smith (1995: 105).

[4] The director himself points this out in an interview: "Dans *Ecce bombo*, au moment où on dit: 'Et si on allait voir Olga?', j'introduis des personnages qu'on n'a jamais vu auparavant" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 189).

[5] A recent example: David Allegranti, "Mi si nota di più se mi scindo? (e Grillo brinda)", in the Italian edition of *Vanity Fair*, Feb. 21, 2017.

lines.[6] At a bar, Michele gets into a fight with a stranger who makes the offhand remark that all politicians are the same, no matter whether they're communists or fascists. "But what is this? Where are we? Is this an Alberto Sordi movie?!", Michele asks indignantly. "You *deserve* Alberto Sordi!," he yells, as if this was the worst insult he could possibly throw at the man.[7] Moretti himself recalls with undisguised pride how in 1994, in the first demonstration against the newly elected Berlusconi government, a banner carried his phrase from many years prior: "But where are we? In an Alberto Sordi movie?!"[8] "For leftist, alternative, educated students [*Ecce bombo*] was 'a must' and they recited dialogues and lines by heart," Luana Ciavola points out (2011: 119). "Its quotations have even been printed on t-shirts." My only qualification to this statement is that I see no reason to use the past tense yet.

However, such quotations are by nature fragmentary, and they do not require, or even favour, an understanding of the film as a whole: each of the gags can be appreciated without much familiarity with the historical context or the film's overall narrative. A broader comprehension requires overcoming two kinds of obstacles: historical (how to make sense of the many specific references *Ecce bombo* makes to the period?) and narrative (how to make sense of such a fragmented story)? While my interpretative work includes an attempt to figure out and explain the historical references, I also believe that the film's opacity has first of all to be acknowledged, rather than simply explained away. Moretti did not make opaque films by chance, or by mistake. As David Bordwell remarks, in the context of a discussion about the work of Jean-Luc Godard,

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[6] Giovanni Bogani, 2015, *Faccio Cose, Vedo Gente… Le Parole del Cinema*, Firenze: Apice.

[7] Alberto Sordi (1920-2003) was an actor and film director who was particularly popular from the 1950s through to the 1970s, thanks to comic films where he played an everyman affecting complete cynicism towards social institutions. He worked with the likes of Federico Fellini, Dino Risi, Mario Monicelli, Luigi Comencini, and others.

[8] Moretti shot this demonstration and included it in *Aprile* (1998), but he did not include the banner. He mentions it in an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*: "il y avait … une autre banderole, qu'on ne voit pas dans le film mais qui personnellement m'avait fait grand plaisir, c'était la phrase suivante, que je dis dans *Ecce bombo*: '*Les Rouges et les Noirs, c'est la même chose? Mais on est dans un film d'Alberto Sordi ou quoi?!*' … En Italie, les Noirs sont les fascistes" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 55).

> The critic's task is not to find the correct meaning, to domesticate the extraordinary, but rather to explain the conditions within which the difficulties emerge and have consequences. What creates these problems? What effects do they generate? (1985: 313)[9]

Ecce bombo as art cinema – and its parody

Earlier on, I have justified my interest in Bordwell's ideas about the biographical legend in part with the American film scholar's constant effort to create a link between the analysis of individual filmmakers and the historical and aesthetic frameworks that make their works intelligible.[10] Even when conducting in-depth studies of Dreyer, Ozu, or Eisenstein, Bordwell constantly frames each artist's singularity within the larger context – the social and aesthetic constraints and opportunities they faced. Thanks to this, his studies may have individual filmmakers as their focus, but they are not individualistic in method, and thus they do not impede, but rather enrich, an appreciation of the broader historical picture – the project Bordwell pursues under the heading of a "historical poetics of cinema".

To account for the variety of strategies fictional films deploy, Bordwell has developed a typology of "modes of film narration". One of these modes is the "art cinema", which the American film scholar first introduced in a concise, seminal essay originally published in 1979.[11] The "art cinema", as understood by Bordwell, offers a promising framework for making sense of Moretti's work, in that it allows us to consider the episodic quality of *Ecce bombo* not as an anomaly, but as a convention.

Historically speaking, art cinema refers to a type of "foreign" film that garnered attention in some cultural hubs of the US in the 1950s and 1960s, in

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[9] In an attempt to call attention to the need for analysis and description, Bordwell sounds at points somewhat dismissive of the interpretative effort, especially at this stage. Differently from what the quote implies, I do believe that striving to "find the correct meaning" is one of the critic's tasks. With this qualification, however, I think his statement stands.

[10] See chapter 2 (above), especially the section titled "Biographical legend and historical context".

[11] A few years later, Bordwell expanded and refined his analysis of the art cinema in a chapter of his 1985 book *Narration in the fiction film* (pp.205-233). I will refer to the original essay to sketch out Bordwell's fundamental ideas, complementing it with the later piece whenever pertinent.

the context of social, economic and legal changes that led to a diminishing of Hollywood's dominance:

> In the United States, the courts' divorcement decrees created a shortage of films for exhibition. Production firms needed overseas markets and exhibitors needed to compete with television. In Europe, the end of the war reestablished international commerce and facilitated film export and coproductions. Thomas Guback has shown how, after 1954, films began to be made for international audiences. American firms sponsored foreign production, and foreign films helped American exhibitors fill screen time. (Bordwell 2008: 152)

Paradigmatic examples include films by Ingmar Bergman (*Summer with Monika*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*), Akira Kurosawa (*Rashomon*, *Ikiru*, *Seven Samurai*), Federico Fellini (*La strada*, *Nights of Cabiria*, *La dolce vita*), or the French New Wave (*Les 400 Coups*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Breathless*). While the high tide of the art cinema comes in the late 1950s and 1960s, the Italian neorealist films of the immediate post-War (e.g., *Rome Open City*, *Paisà*, *Bicycle Thieves*) can be seen as precursors.

Is "art cinema" then just a fad, describing the way "foreign" films were consumed in the US in a particular period, rather than a set of pictures with internal coherence? In a narrow sense, perhaps. "The postwar 'art house', a film theater in a city or campus town, was a symptom of the new audience: college-educated, middle-class cinéphiles looking for films consonant with contemporary ideas of modernism in art and literature. Parallel audiences emerged in European intellectual centers," says Bordwell (1985: 230).[12] He admits these works stem from very diverse national origins, that they do not necessarily all deal with the same topics, that stylistic practices within this category differ. What they do have in common, in his view, is a break with the narrative conventions of Hollywood storytelling. The concept of "art cinema" hangs on the establishment of a fundamental departure from the norms of the "classical" narrative mode, a break that is akin to, and actually draws upon, the break that literary modernists enacted with regard to the forms of

[12] The same could be said of other parts of the world, such as Latin America.

the classical, realist novel. In some ways, art cinema also has affinities with earlier traditions in silent European cinema, such as German expressionism (Robert Wiene, F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang) and the so-called French Impressionists (Abel Gance, Jean Epstein, etc.) from the 1920s.[13]

The crucial element of the art film's differentiation from classical narration is the loosening of causal relations. "In the classical cinema," Bordwell says (2008: 152), referring to the norms of narration that have been prevalent in Hollywood since 1920, "cause-effect logic and narrative parallelism generate a narrative which projects its action through psychologically-defined, goal-oriented characters." In place of this tightly knit dramatic action, the art cinema motivates the narrative according to two distinct principles: realism (of an "objective" and a "subjective" kind) and authorial expression.[14] "Objective" realism refers to a way of depicting events that purports to be true to life, a documentary impulse manifested in a general preference for real locations over sets, the representation of time in its actual, life-like duration, the inclusion of relatively unknown actors (or even outright amateurs), and so forth. "Psychological" realism, on the other hand, concerns the presentation of events in such a way as to capture how they are subjectively experienced, including distortions of sound and vision, of memory, and of the passage of time (with the use of jump cuts, slow-motion, freeze frames, etc.). "This is a fully expressive realism … Dreams, memories, hallucinations, daydreams, fantasies, and other mental activities can find embodiment in the image or on the sound track" (Bordwell 1985: 208).

In terms of types of motivation, Bordwell (2008: 152) says in the "classical" narrative spectators try to make sense of the film according to three basic criteria: verisimilitude (*is this plausible?*), conformity with genre (*is it typical of this sort of film?*), and compositional unity (*how does it*

[13] "Historically … the art cinema has its roots in an opposition to Hollywood nurtured within various national film industries of the silent era and sustained by concepts borrowed from modernism in theatre and literature" (Bordwell 1985: 229).

[14] In the later essay, Bordwell calls these "three broader interlocking procedural schemata – 'objective' realism, 'expressive' or subjective realism, and narrational commentary" (1985: 205).

advance the story?). By contrast, "realism"[15] is the default criterion of interpretation in the art cinema, with artistic motivation as a sort of back-up, complementary strategy: what happens in the story should in principle accord with what life is *really* like, or else be taken to express some point the filmmaker is trying to put across.[16] Bordwell explains:

> [In the art film] whenever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek realistic motivation. (Is a character's mental state causing the uncertainty? Is life just leaving loose ends?) If we're thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being "said" here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?) Ideally, the film hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision. (2008: 156)

In classical narration, the tight cause-effect chain is served by a certain narrative organization of time and space, which builds on the chronological presentation of events, the recourse to flashback to provide background information, and the use of parallel editing and crosscutting to depict situations happening concurrently at disparate locations. Art cinema, on the other hand, allows for more unorthodox manipulations of story order, meant to convey the subjective workings of a mind in its complex crisscrossing of perception and memory, such as those of *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963) and *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959). Amongst Moretti's films, *Palombella rossa* (1989), which I address in detail in the next chapter, is the consummate example of this narrational strategy, but a commitment to subjective realism emerges time and again throughout the oeuvre. Here is the filmmaker speaking about his recent *Mia madre* (2015):

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[15] I put "realism" in quotes to signal it is a convention, a particular understanding of what verisimilitude entails: "For the classical cinema, rooted in the popular novel, short story, and well-made drama of the late nineteenth century, 'reality' is assumed to be a tacit coherence among events, a consistency and clarity of individual identity. … Of course the realism of the art cinema is no more 'real' than that of the classical film; it is simply a different canon of realistic motivation, a new *vraisemblance*" (Bordwell 1985: 206).

[16] A recent film, *The Florida Project* (Sean Baker, 2017), perfectly expresses this duality, abruptly transitioning, in the final sequence, from realistic depiction to authorial expressivity of a fantastic kind, creating a shocking contrast. Many critics noted *The Florida Project*'s indebtedness to the Italian tradition of neorealism – a kind of updated version of Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948).

> The present time of the film is the time of [the protagonist's] emotional state: there, everything takes place simultaneously, and with the same sense of urgency. There are problems at work, grief for her mother, concern for her daughter; at the same time, there are also her memories, her dreams, her imagination. If, in some scenes, spectators cannot tell right away whether they're watching a dream, real life, a recollection, or the film within the film, that is something I'm pleased with, an effect I've worked to achieve. In the way I staged the scenes, I didn't want to stylistically mark the difference between the ones that are real and those that are imagined, the dreams and the memories. In the editing, I've tried to create a certain porosity between the various levels, with no outright demarcations, as if one could glide almost imperceptibly from one dimension to the next.[17]

A smooth concatenation of events, with each element falling neatly into place by the end, is rejected as being formulaic and untrue to life.[18] Instead, art cinema makes room for contingency, causal gaps, and distortions of perception,

> seeking to depict the vagaries of real life, to "dedramatize" the narrative by showing both climaxes and trivial moments … [T]his new cinema deals with the reality of the imagination as well, but treats this as if it were as objective as the world before us. (Bordwell 1985: 206)[19]

The focus of spectatorial concern in the classical narrative is the story – *who did what, how, and why*? In the art film, on the other hand, *the way* the story is told becomes more prominent: "Who is telling this story? How is this story being told? Why is this story being told in this way?" (Bordwell 2008: 155). Authorial expressivity rests on the notion that the film articulates

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[17] "Le temps présent du film est le temps de l'état émotionnel de Margherita, dans lequel tout cohabite au même moment, avec la même urgence. Il y a les problèmes au travail, la douleur pour sa mère, les préoccupations pour sa fille; en même temps il y a aussi ses souvenirs, ses rêves, son imagination. Quand un spectateur, au cours de certaines scènes, ne comprend pas tout de suite qu'il s'agit d'un rêve, de la réalité, d'un souvenir ou du film dans le film, ça me fait plaisir. Parce que j'ai travaillé dans cette direction. C'est-à-dire que dans la mise en scène je n'ai pas voulu marquer stylistiquement la différence entre les scènes réelles et les scènes imaginaires, ou bien les rêves et les souvenirs. Et pendant le montage j'ai cherché à rendre poreux les niveaux du film entre eux, sans coupure nette, comme si on glissait d'une dimension à une autre d'une manière presque imperceptible" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 10).

[18] "In the name of verisimilitude, the tight causality of classical Hollywood construction is replaced by a more tenuous linking of events" (Bordwell 1985: 206).

[19] Here Bordwell is paraphrasing the ideas of the French film critic Marcel Martin in the article "Les voies de l'authenticité", *Cinéma 66, 104*, March 1966, pp.52-79.

the artist's personal vision, the director being by and large assumed to be the unifying intelligence behind it.[20] "Within this frame of reference, the author is the textual force "who" communicates (what is the film *saying*?) and "who" expresses (what is the artist's *personal vision*?)" (Bordwell 2008: 154 – emphases in the original). Art cinema isn't exactly coterminous with "auteur" cinema, for – as the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics tried to show in the late 1950s – a director may very well have a personal stylistic or thematic trademark and still work within classical narrative conventions, but the role the author plays in art cinema is crucial in the way it guides spectators to make sense of events in the film, especially when these flout realistic representation.

With the help of critics, interviews with directors, film festivals, and retrospectives, audiences learn to assess each work against a filmmaker's oeuvre – reading each story as part of a larger story, as it were.[21] The spectator learns to identify the stylistic markers that point to the author's intervention, including technical touches and recurrent motifs:

> The competent viewer watches the film expecting not order in the narrative but stylistic signatures in the narration … The film also offers itself as a chapter in an *oeuvre*. This strategy becomes especially apparent in the convention of the multi-film work (the *Apu* trilogy, Bergman's two trilogies, Rohmer's "Moral Tales," and Truffaut's Doinel series). The initiated catch citations … (Bordwell 2008: 155)

At least six of Moretti's first seven feature films compose a similar series. In interviews, the filmmaker explicitly says he plays a kind of recognition game with the audience. This includes the protagonist's recurrent traits and quirks, such as his fondness for pastries or his fixation on shoes; recognizable narrational traits, such as dream-like scenes where the story is suspended and characters sing and dance with apparent disregard for plausibility; and direct citations of previous films, like the repeated reference

[20] "The art cinema foregrounds the *author* …, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension" (Bordwell 2008: 154).

[21] In a 2008 postscript to his 1979 essay, Bordwell signals the growing relevance of an ever-expanding international circuit of film festivals, which work as "the major clearing house for art cinema" (2008: 160), citing the particular importance of "the big three": Cannes, Berlin, and Venice. As noted, Moretti worked his way through this ladder, receiving recognition first at Venice, then Berlin, and finally Cannes.

to the Trotskyite pastry cook or the idea for a musical (which emerges in *Dear Diary* and recurs in *Aprile*).[22] The recurrence of such features is what allows the Italian scholar Mariella Cruciani to read Moretti's entire oeuvre as the process of psychological maturation of a single fictional person: in her interpretation, under a variety of circumstances and a few name changes, it is always the same protagonist who emerges, one who develops from film to film.[23] The plausibility of this reading is reinforced by the existence of an actual human being behind the corpus: Cruciani reads the Morettian protagonist in a biographical key, even if she takes good care to signal the differences between the fictional figure(s) and the flesh and blood Moretti.[24]

In art cinema, the figure of the director offers at the very least a set of expectations by which the film is publicized and through which it will be interpreted. "Directors' statements of intent guide comprehension of the film, while a body of work linked by an authorial signature encourages viewers to read each film as a chapter of an oeuvre," Bordwell adds (1985: 211). The function the filmmaker performs here is, in commercial terms, similar to the one carried out by star and genre in classical Hollywood.[25]

One thing the art cinema narrative *shares* with classical narration, according to Bordwell, is the centrality of psychological motivation; but the way this is conceived in each mode is significantly different. "Whereas the characters of the classical narrative have clear-cut traits and objectives, the characters of the art cinema lack defined desires and goals." Bordwell could be describing Michele and his friends in *Ecce bombo* when he writes:

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[22] "Il y a cette espèce de jeu qui consiste à revenir sur certains leitmotive, certains thèmes récurrents, le chocolat, les gâteaux, la balle de tennis avec laquelle je joue à la maison, la famille, les repas en famille, le ballon que je manie avec adresse, le bal, le juke-box…" (Gili 2017: 27).

[23] "Partendo dal presupposto che ciascuno dei film di Moretti, pur essendo autonomo, costituisca, tuttavia, la prosecuzione e lo sviluppo di situazioni, stati d'animo, relazioni e tematiche già presenti nel film precedente, cercheremo di dimostrare … come i film in questione rappresentano le varie fasi del percorso esistenziale di un'unica personalità immaginaria … Tale personalità è anche – inevitabilmente – una costruzione autobiografica" (Cruciani 2013: Kindle 6%).

[24] "Michele e Nanni non sono certo estranei l'uno all'altro ma neppure possono essere identificati o confusi" (Cruciani 2013: Kindle 7%).

[25] "Lacking identifiable stars and familiar genres, the art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text" (Bordwell 2008: 154).

> Characters may act for inconsistent reasons … or may question themselves about their goals … Choices are vague or nonexistent. Hence a certain drifting episodic quality to the art film's narrative. Characters may wander out and never reappear; events may lead to nothing. The Hollywood protagonist speeds directly towards the target; lacking a goal, the art-film character slides passively from one situation to another. (2008: 153)

The agents' seeming irrationality is, according to Bordwell's formalist analysis, an effect of the narration itself – "which can play down characters' causal projects, keep silent about their motives, emphasize 'insignificant' actions and intervals, and never reveal effects of the actions" (1985: 207). In Bordwell's view, it is precisely because a clear cause-effect chain that would motivate action is absent that characters become "complex", spending a lot of time explaining and discussing their thoughts and actions, delving in their own emotions. "Had the characters a goal, life would no longer seem so meaningless," says Bordwell (2008: 153). Whether these kinds of characters and themes emerge from the formal features of the narration, or whether it is the other way around, the fact is that existentialist themes, which were pervasive in the cultural currents of the post-2nd World War, perfectly fit this kind of narrative structure.[26] Central to art cinema are scenes where people struggle to understand, and articulate, their own feelings:

> Slow to act, these characters tell all … The dissection of feeling is often represented explicitly as therapy and cure … but even when it is not, the forward flow of causation is braked and characters pause to seek the aetiology of their feelings. Characters often tell one another stories: autobiographical events (especially from childhood), fantasies, and dreams. (A recurring line: "I had a strange dream last night.") The hero becomes a supersensitive individual, one of those people on whom nothing is lost. (Bordwell 2008: 153-154)

At first glance, Michele and his male friends in *Ecce bombo*, who gather regularly solely to engage in the task of emotional self-exploration, are precisely the kind of characters Bordwell describes. Upon closer inspection,

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[26] "The art film's thematic of *la condition humaine*, its attempt to pronounce judgments on 'modern life' as a whole, proceeds from its formal needs" (Bordwell 2008: 153).

however, their self-scrutiny is a farce: when Michele and his friends look inside themselves, they gaze into a void. Interpretations of a psychoanalytical bent are depicted in slapstick mode, as when Goffredo (Piero Galletti) evokes a (supposed) early memory at one of the meetings: "Maybe this is all a consequence of childhood traumas. I remember, when I was a child, many years ago…" – and the image goes out of focus, while Michele makes a ludicrous sound with his tongue. As the focus is restored, a pseudo-flashback is introduced, showing an outdoor area with very tall trees, where a man, dressed in a formal suit and a hat, with a whip in his hand, runs after a young boy. Depicted in hyper-saturated colours and with surrealistic themes, the scene spoofs the psychological art film of a Freudian persuasion. As Eleanor Andrews suggests (2015: 76-77), Moretti pokes fun both at psychoanalytical clichés and at hackneyed ways of conveying a change in the reality status of a scene.

However, *Ecce bombo*'s relation to the art film should not be understood as either following its norms or simply making fun of them; it rather does *both* things at once. In this respect, the film's opening sequence is programmatic: just as quickly as it satirizes Italian mainstream cinema, it mocks the discourse that criticizes Italian cinema. Employing a device Moretti will use again many years later, *Ecce bombo* has a "false start": in the first couple of minutes we are unknowingly watching a film-within-the-film.[27] A woman and a man get into a camp trailer. The camera remains outside, but the agitation in the camper and the noises coming from it imply the couple is having riotously loud sex. Judging by the scene alone, this would seem to be a crass, sexploitative farce, which both visually and thematically looks as different from a Moretti film as can be, and from the kind of cinema his name was associated with even then. The director clarifies: "It's the kind of scene

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[27] The opening scenes of *The Caiman* and *Mia madre* are both excerpts from a film-within-the-film, something that only becomes apparent after a couple of minutes. In both cases, as in *Ecce bombo*, the contrast between the movie-within-the-movie and the rest of the film is stylistically and thematically striking. This is a topic I will return to in the following chapters: see in particular the section titled "The troubles of political commitment" in chapter 5, and "Three ways of staging Berlusconi" in chapter 6.

one would often see in Italian comedies at the time."[28] However, for a moment, *this* is Moretti's film, for only when the scene comes to an end do we realize it belongs to a film being shot within *Ecce bombo*'s diegesis. Immediately Michele enters the frame, to ask a member of the film crew what is the title of the movie being shot: is it "The Teat of the Orient"? No, it's "The Steel Workers Have Only a Few Guns", he's told. While the names sound absurd, they are most likely a satirical take on Lina Wertmüller's long-winded titles, particularly *Mimì metallurgico ferito nell'onore*. Wertmüller was a highly regarded filmmaker at the time, and one of Moretti's pet peeves, as attested by several taunts directed at her both in *Ecce bombo* and in Moretti's debut feature, *I Am An Autarkist* (*Io sono un autarchico*, 1976).[29]

The film-within-a-film, a device Moretti will use numerous times throughout his career, is itself an art cinema motif: "A film-within-a-film structure realistically motivates references to other works; it allows unexpected shifts between levels of fictionality; it can occasionally trigger parody of the art cinema itself," Bordwell points out (1985: 211-212). The opening scene of *Ecce bombo* does all three. A few moments later, Michele reproaches his girlfriend, Silvia (Susanna Javicoli), for taking part in such an awful project. His objections are both aesthetic and political:

> *Michele:* Silvia, quite frankly! I like you, but being assistant director in this filth! Italian cinema is racist…
>
> *Silvia:* "Italian cinema is racist: it picks on old women, homosexuals, ugly women, the cross-eyed, the lame…"
>
> *Michele:* Meanwhile, though, a completely new cinema of ideas is emerging, it's growing, it's bursting in!

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[28] "C'est le genre de scène qu'on voyait souvent à l'époque dans la comédie italienne" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 47).

[29] Wertmüller was the first woman to get an Oscar nomination for Best Director, in 1977, with *Pasqualino settebellezze* (released in English-speaking countries as *Seven Beauties*). *Mimì metallurgico ferito nell'onore* was screened at the Cannes Festival in 1972 and then released internationally as *The Seduction of Mimi*. Her work has been the object of a revival in recent years, thanks in part to the documentary *Behind the White Glasses* (Valerio Ruiz, 2015) dedicated to her films, where Martin Scorsese speaks enthusiastically of her oeuvre. In April 2017, the New York arthouse cinema Quad reopened after large renovation works with a retrospective of Wertmüller's films.

Michele's arguments sound plausible, the kinds of things a young left-wing intellectual like Moretti would most probably think. However, by finishing his sentences, Silvia undermines the scolding: she has heard Michele's tired lines so often she can recite them by heart. His own delivery is exceedingly theatrical: as he pronounces the final sentence, he makes a little mannerism with the head, as if to be ridiculously emphatic, robbing his own words of their punch. Moreover, the satirical target here isn't just the fictional Michele, but Moretti himself.[30] The character's words about a "completely new cinema" are eerily similar to those the filmmaker uses whenever he wants to describe the kind of cinema that most influenced him. In interviews, Moretti repeatedly cites his debt to the generation of Italian filmmakers that preceded him – the early films of Marco Bellocchio, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, Marco Ferreri, Ermanno Olmi, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Pier Paolo Pasolini – as well as to the auteurist "New Waves" of the 1960s in France, England ("Free Cinema"), and Poland. "Those films encouraged us to think about both cinema and society. Those film-makers were looking for a new kind of cinema and new kinds of human relations," he says, as if channelling the farcical Michele (de Mondenard 2012).[31]

Just like his fictional alter ego, Moretti implies a direct link between cinema and politics. Meanwhile, the filmmaker often points out that he was never a fan of political cinema as a genre. In an interview, he clarifies that when the fictional film producer in *The Caiman* (*Il caimano*, 2006), Bruno Bonomo (Silvio Orlando), says he always hated political films, "even 30 years ago", he is also speaking the director's actual mind.[32] Moretti is preoccupied with the attitude the film imparts to the audience, something he treats as a

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[30] Amongst Moretti's early films, *Sweet Dreams* (*Sogni d'oro*, 1981) is the one where the director pushes this strategy furthest. See my observations on that film in chapter 3 (above), especially in the section titled "Biographical echoes and spectatorial engagement".

[31] Moretti had made a very similar statement a full decade earlier (Bonsaver 2002: 30).

[32] *The Caiman* tells the fictional story of a young filmmaker, Teresa (Jasmine Trinca), who wants to make a film exposing the crimes of then Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The film producer Bonomo goes along with the project despite the fact that he is utterly uninterested in any political project. *Both* characters represent Moretti's feelings to some extent, as the director makes plain: "Je me sens à la fois proche de Teresa, qui désire faire ce film, mais aussi de Bruno, qui dit: 'Je n'aimais déjà les films politiques il y a trente ans, alors aujourd'hui!'" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 208). See the section "Who is Moretti now?" in chapter 6.

political problem. In order to understand his complex relationship with this issue, we need to take a look at another aesthetic tradition that helps explain many features of Moretti's cinema – a tradition whose influence was felt early in his career, but which remains relevant to this day.[33]

A Brechtian inflection

Practically all the fundamental features of art cinema, as outlined by Bordwell, resonate strongly with Moretti's work, not only in this period but perhaps even more so in later films, such as *Palombella rossa*. Stylistically, we see a preference for real locations, for the use of the long take to convey real-life duration, for non-professional actors, and so forth. On the narrative front, dramatic aspects are downplayed, characters behave in seemingly illogical ways, guided by goals which are often nebulous. Additionally, the fact that *Ecce bombo* pokes fun at the art film makes it no less of an art film itself. As Bordwell (1985: 212) points out, the art film parody is a possibility that is immanent in the art cinema mode. Bordwell cites two precedents for this; intriguingly, both are Italian: Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Lady Without Camelias* (*La signora senza camelie*, 1953) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *La ricotta* (1963).

The definition of a mode of narration does not preclude the possibility of internal modifications, as Bordwell himself stresses: the category of art cinema is not static. In the course of a detailed analysis of narrative principles in Alain Resnais' *The War Is Over* (*La Guerre est Finie*, 1966), for instance, Bordwell hints at how conventions of the art film have historically evolved, when he observes that the "use of time and ambiguity [in this film] would be improbable in a 1950s film, or a 1984 one" (1985: 228). Conversely, art cinema of the 1970s and 1980s shows the rise of a stylistic trait he dubs the "planimetric image", a kind of staging that is indeed prevalent in Moretti's two first feature films. "The shot is framed perpendicular to a back

[33] Brecht's presence is a crucial axis of my analysis of Moretti's later works in chapter 6. I also notice a few allusions to the German playwright in *Palombella rossa*: see the section titled "The sentimental element" in chapter 5.

wall or ground, with figures caught in frontal or profile positions, as in police mug shots" (Bordwell 2008: 163). This type of *mise-en-scène* is in line with the art cinema's earlier preference for the long take, but it radicalizes it through the use of the static camera and the medium-long shot. In that very spirit, Moretti speaks of "internal editing" (or "editing within the shot"), to signal how it allows characters to come in and out of the frame without recourse to editing, *and* – most importantly – without any camera movement. In contrast to other young filmmakers, Moretti prides himself of not moving the camera senselessly in what he sees as a futile attempt to display technical proficiency.[34]

A crucial effect of the "planimetric image", in Bordwell's terms, is the creation of a distance from the affective tenor of the scene.[35] Indeed, at this stage Moretti manifests a radical distrust of pathos, a sure sign of the Brechtian inflection of his brand of art cinema. "As far as I remember," he admits to Chatrian and Renzi, "at the time I was rarely moved at the cinema" (2008: 48).[36] In interviews, the director has credited Truffaut's *The Woman Next Door* (*La Femme d'à Côté*, 1981) with changing this reticent attitude, directly associating the more developed narrative fictions of his films of the mid-1980s with such a change of heart:

> I can tell you the exact date I stopped seeing films in an impermeable manner. I remember quite vividly the experience of watching *The Woman Next Door* … the film moved me, as a spectator, like never before. I was shaken, as in a shock. And it often happens that my work as a spectator influences my work as a filmmaker. Since I had felt moved, I wanted to move spectators in turn. That required that more attention be paid to the story, to

[34] "Je tournais avec la caméra fixe parce que je ne voulais pas de ces mouvement de caméra faits au hasard, juste pour faire voir que l'on sait tourner en bougeant la caméra" (Gili 2017: 30).

[35] "This device presents the scene as a more abstract configuration, perhaps distancing us from its emotional tenor, and it can support those psychologically imbued *temps morts* that are crucial to the realistic impulse of the mode" (Bordwell 2008: 163).

[36] "Autant que je me souvienne, je n'étais que rarement ému au cinéma" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 48).

> the plot, and that is why, for *Bianca* [1984] and *The Mass Is Ended*, I searched for the collaboration of a screenwriter, Sandro Petraglia.[37]

In this early period, Moretti evinces a Brechtian preoccupation with avoiding what are thought to be the cathartic, facile effects of empathy. For Brecht, a tight cause and effect dramatic construction risked creating an impression of inevitability, as if events and characters were moved by fate, leading the spectators to a passive acceptance of what transpires in the story. In order to avoid such "narcotic" effects, the narrative must not proceed smoothly towards a cathartic finale, but instead be broken with interruptions and digressions in just the way *Ecce bombo* is, into a series of almost independent scenes. Brecht had written:

> As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us the chance to interpose our judgment. (1964: 201)

"I have always thought of each sequence as a sort of a short film," Moretti declares in an interview, virtually echoing the German playwright. In his films, there is rarely a transitional scene linking two separate sequences, he notes.[38]

In discussing Brecht's ideas, and the way Moretti engages with them, it is vital to recover their overall logic, for Brechtianism is all too often rendered as a set of somewhat arbitrary, somewhat dogmatic rules. The German playwright's ideas on the theatre rely heavily on Marxian premises.[39] In Brecht's view, in a class society, the conventional theatre – as all culture –

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[37] "J'ai en tête une date précise à laquelle, en tant que spectateur, j'ai arrêté de voir les films d'une manière imperméable. Je me souviens très bien avoir vu *La Femme d'à côté* … et le film m'avait touché comme spectateur comme cela ne m'était jamais arrivé auparavant. J'étais bouleversé, sous le choc. Il arrive souvent que mon travail de spectateur influence mon travail de réalisateur. Et alors, puisque j'étais ému comme spectateur, je voulais à mon tour émouvoir les spectateurs en tant que réalisateur. Il fallait donc donner plus d'importance à la trame, à l'intrigue. C'est pourquoi, pour *Bianca* et *La messe est finie*, j'ai demandé à un scénariste, Sandro Petraglia, de travailler avec moi" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 14).

[38] "J'ai toujours pensé aux séquences comme à des petits films. On n'y voit que rarement une scène de raccord: ce sont des séquences autonomes." (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 48).

[39] I am using "Marxian" to refer to ideas expressed specifically by Marx, leaving the term "Marxist" to the wider political and philosophical traditions inspired by Marx's writings.

performs a conservative political role, whether it aims to do so or not. The stage projects the real world into an imaginary one, presenting the latter as beyond human grasp. "The theatre as we know it shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium)," Brecht writes (1964: 189).

This concept has an obvious parallel in the way Marx sees religion; indeed, the idea that theatrical entertainment works as a kind of drug is explicitly articulated by Brecht.[40] As happens with religion, when the actual contradictions human beings experience in their lives are transposed to the fantastic realm, people feel bereft of their ability to change them. In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx had observed: "The fact that the secular foundation detaches itself from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm is precisely only to be explained by the very dismemberment and self-contradictoriness of this secular basis" (§4). Deprived of a sense of agency, people are led to accept their current lives as destiny, as if they followed a predetermined fate, an impression the tales usually presented on the stage reinforce, according to Brecht. From a revolutionary standpoint, the theatre cannot therefore be content with constructing progressive tales in the unreachable plane of the imagination, but it must fundamentally transform the audience's relation to the spectacle, and thereby change the way people engage the social environment in which they live. Similarly, in his polemic with Feuerbach, Marx insisted there was no point debating the fantastic stories told by religion, for the only way to address them would be to transform the actual social relations that give rise to them. Hence the famous dictum, which is now engraved on Marx's tombstone: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (*Theses on Feuerbach* §11). For Brecht, similarly, art's goal should be to empower people in real life, in their day-to-day existence. If bourgeois culture creates an insurmountable gap between

[40] "In our present society the old opera cannot be just 'wished away'. Its illusions have an important social function. The drug is irreplaceable; it cannot be done without" (Brecht 1964: 41). This passage clearly echoes Marx, who in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, one of his earliest works, had written: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Marx 1970 [1843]: 131).

art and life – spectatorship and entertainment to one side, activity and work to the other – revolutionary culture has to mend this divide.[41]

How did the German playwright see the theatre dismantling its mystifying role? If the internal unity of the diegetic world accounts for its narcotic effect, then, as a first task, revolutionary theatre has to pierce through the seeming cohesiveness and autonomy of the storyworld. If conventional drama creates an irresistible logic to produce an inevitable outcome, in Brecht's "epic theatre" the diegetic world is not represented as if obeying only its self-enclosed, unified, autonomous logic. Narrative progression must *not* seem logical or inevitable, and the sequence of events should not conform to prevailing notions about what is plausible or bound to occur. In real life, no situation has a predetermined course. In the same spirit, in a 1986 interview to *Positif*, Moretti remarked that even if the narrative element played a much more important role in his latest works (*Bianca* and *The Mass is Ended*) compared to earlier ones, the plot of these films was still quite fragmented, in that their stories lacked a tight structure of "vertical development".[42] Instead of constantly propelling the spectator to ask herself about "what happens next," Moretti's films make room for scenes or elements which, in story terms, do not lead anywhere.

In Brecht's view, the tales of classical, "Aristotelian" drama like to present themselves as if they were outside history: even when a play is "historical", it is only superficially so, as if dressing perennially similar situations in costume. Theatre from different historical periods is staged as if the contextual features were purely incidental, purportedly revealing what is timeless, essential, beneath the contingent. Against this, revolutionary theatre should be historical in a fuller sense, keeping the distinguishing

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[41] Brecht directly alludes to Marx's thesis eleven in some of his writings of the mid-1930s: "The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished *not just to explain the world but also to change it*" (1964: 72 – emphasis added). Similarly, in an article for the *New York Times* in 1935, he draws on the Marxian concept of "praxis": "Briefly, the Aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)" (1964: 79).

[42] "Tout en ayant toujours une structure fragmentaire – mes films manquent de 'tirant narratif' comme on dit en italien, ils manquent d'un mécanisme de développement vertical – *Bianca* et *La messe est finie* marquent une plus grande attention de ma part à la construction du récit" (Gili 2017: 34-35).

marks of its time right before the spectators' eyes. Bourgeois drama is ultimately static; by contrast, revolutionary theatre is a theatre of impermanence, which does not deal in timeless wisdom, but in historical contingency:

> We must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along … Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too. (Brecht 1964: 190)

History doesn't merely show us what has happened, but also that things haven't always been the way they are now. "Men make their own history," Marx asserted at the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), even if – he added – "they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." For Brecht, if every situation is presented as historical, then people will see current events themselves as bound to change. In order to undercut the idea that the drama conveys some timeless, immortal wisdom about human nature, he would deliberately insert in his plays elements to date them, such as recent newspaper headlines and other documentary materials. In the same spirit, Moretti intersperses his films with references to current events, movies, and public personalities.[43] In *Ecce bombo*, the protagonist browses through newspaper clippings and reads aloud a sequence of headlines: "Andreotti: Italy is the freest country in the world"; "The first black Miss

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[43] There is only one exception to this principle across Moretti's entire filmography: *The Son's Room* does not include a single reference to current events. The director explicitly acknowledges this fact and connects it with the emotional effect he was striving to achieve: he says he preferred not to date the story for fear that it "might hamper the film's emotional core". The idea still echoes Brecht, if only *a contrario*: here, Moretti avoids specific references lest they might interfere with emotional engagement. "Chaque fois que dans l'écriture, ou au tournage, il y avait quelque chose qui pouvait évoquer l'actualité, cela ne me semblait pas nécessaire: cela pouvait interférer avec le noyau émotif du film" (Codelli 2001: 10). Moretti takes this principle to seemingly minor details. In an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma* around the same time, the interviewers point out that at one point in the story a character goes to the movies, but – quite unusually for a Moretti film – we have no indication of what film it was (Joyard and Larcher 2001: 21).

Universe"; "Alberto Sordi claims 30 million from the tax-office". There is no apparent logic to this progression, no context, not a word of commentary – just the titles, which therefore acquire a critical, sardonic edge. Without missing a beat, Michele proceeds to read the list of restaurants open that day. The flat delivery implies that all things written in a newspaper are equally trivial.

In Marxian terms, society is crisscrossed by opposing forces, and this is what not only enables but positively ensures that change will occur. History is no monolith: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," as Marx famously put it in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). A historical situation can only be truthfully apprehended if it is conceived in a *dialectical* manner – not as following an inevitable course, but as a field of forces and possibilities. Echoing Marx's dictum from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Brecht writes that "The 'historical conditions' must of course not be imagined … as mysterious Powers … On the contrary, *they are created and maintained by men (and will in due course be altered by them)*" (1964: 190 – emphasis added). The spectator must be made conscious that her situation is by definition transient, and therefore pregnant with possibilities. If the current situation is played as historical, its contingent aspect will be rendered obvious, so that which seemed natural to people in their own behaviour – *it's the way things have always been* – is revealed as just one possibility. Otherwise, "what men experience among themselves they think of as 'the' human experience" (Brecht 1946: 192). For the German playwright, we should be wary of neat stories and rounded characters, which try to pass themselves off as realistic but are completely untrue to life.[44] The only realistic way of depicting a situation or a character is as an experiment.

The German playwright therefore takes a nuanced approach to realism: the theatre must depict the reality it aims to transform, but also reveal its underlying strangeness, to produce in the spectator a sort of a double-take. "If we play works dealing with our own time as though they were

[44] "The laws of motion of a society are not to be demonstrated by 'perfect examples', for 'imperfection' (inconsistency) is an essential part of motion and of the thing moved" (Brecht 1964: 195).

historical, then perhaps the circumstances under which he himself acts will strike him as equally odd; and this is where the critical attitude begins" (Brecht 1964: 190). Merely recording things as they superficially appear to be risks conferring on reality a heavy air of immutability; an element of surprise is a precondition to understanding the world, not merely in order to adapt oneself to current circumstances, but to change them. The Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz summarizes the argument:

> Once things are examined carefully, without the anesthetic of illusion, the familiar will be revealed as strange, the most ordinary experience might be difficult to explain, and the rule, which is what we are used to, might be incomprehensible … [Brecht demands] that we consider nothing natural so that everything may be considered subject to change. (2007: 29)

The epic theatre therefore aims to shed reality of its air of self-evidence, in order to allow the spectator to see things anew. "Here is the outlook, disconcerting but fruitful, which the theatre must provoke with its representations of human social life," wrote Brecht. "It must amaze" (1964: 192).

Moretti follows this anti-naturalistic understanding of realism: he too believes that the goal of art is not to reproduce, and thereby reinforce, reality as it exists. The fictional work should not be a copy, a life-like duplication of the actual world in the imaginary realm. The issue is directly thematised in *Mia madre*, a film that is peppered with Brechtian allusions. At one point in the story, the protagonist, a fictional film director by the name of Margherita (Margherita Buy), clashes with her production team about the choice of the extras to feature in her picture, in the role of factory workers taking part in a protest. Margherita is not happy with the cast, as they do not accord with her idea of how working-class people should look like: they wear piercings, have dyed hair, etc. The production team argues that is how working class people look these days, but the director remains unconvinced: it is *her* film, and therefore she gets to decide what kind of reality is to feature in it. The character of Margherita is avowedly autobiographical, her views on the cinema reflecting the director's own – even when Moretti presents these in a

critical (that is, self-critical) manner. He comments on this episode of *Mia madre* in an interview, and he inserts a quite conspicuous nod to Brecht:

> Margherita is still attached to a particular image of the past, to certain characters and certain people. But the way a filmmaker deals with reality is always problematic. Should one have a mimetic relationship to the world, or should the film try instead to devise a different reality? This applies also to décors, costumes, dialogues, etc. One must be a realist, but not too much so… For there is the real danger that, by glorifying reality, the filmmaker or writer will end up subjugated by it. Some people make films or write books not merely to depict reality, but to reinvent it. One's relationship with reality should be guided by a desire for knowledge, not just stand in strict dependence to that which exists.[45]

Bordwell had already noted that the art cinema relies on two principles – realism and authorial expression – whose coexistence is by definition uneasy: were the film to be strictly realistic, there would be little room for the artist to exercise her shaping hand. The author's presence is foregrounded when what we see on the screen does *not* very obviously match our immediate perception of the world. "Verisimilitude, objective or subjective, is inconsistent with an intrusive author," Bordwell notes (1985: 212). In early Moretti, the scales are decidedly tipped against realism *sensu stricto*: the lighting tends to underscore the artifice, the acting is not naturalistic, the characters' behaviour is not meant to be transparent or even imply psychological cohesion. As it will happen also in many of Moretti's later films – including *Bianca*, *The Mass is Ended*, *Palombella rossa*, *The Caiman*, and *We Have A Pope* (2011) – the dramatic flow of *Ecce bombo* is at one point

[45] "D'un côté il y a Margherita encore ancrée dans certaines images du passé, certains personnages, certaines personnes; de l'autre il y a quand même ce problème qui est qu'un réalisateur doit toujours se confronter à la réalité: faut-il avoir un rapport mimétique, ou faire un film pour préfigurer une réalité différente? Et cela concerne aussi le travail sur les décors, les costumes, les dialogues. Être réaliste mais pas trop… Car parfois le rapport à la réalité, quand on l'exalte, risque de soumettre le réalisateur ou l'écrivain à la réalité. Certains font des films ou écrivent des livres pour réinventer la réalité, pas seulement pour la contourner. Il faut avoir un rapport de connaissance, et non de dépendance, à la réalité" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 18).

interrupted by a scene where characters resort to dancing.[46] This is neither realistic, nor is it compositionally justified: it does not logically follow what comes before, and does not entail any consequences at the level of the story. It is also not generically motivated, as might be the case in a musical.[47] It momentarily puts the tale on hold, emphatically foregrounding the way it is being told – inviting, as it were, an external, non-immersive, critical look on the part of spectators at what they are shown.

To avoid giving a scene an all-encompassing emotional tenor, Brecht propounded a "separation of elements": each track should be used not in harmony with the others, but rather independently – music against dialogue, location against content of the scene. *Ecce bombo* follows that principle. In some scenes, characters are placed in locations that have no realistic or narrative motivation. At an early point, for instance, Michele and his girlfriend Silvia have an inane conversation at what one initially assumes to be a café, but a cut to a much longer shot reveals to be a totally empty, closed-down restaurant that sits on a bridge over a large lake. In terms of the story, no rationale is provided for the odd setting, making it seem arbitrary, or outright absurd. Similarly, later on, Michele discusses his relationship with another girl, Flaminia (Carola Stagnaro), inside a VW Beetle parked on a large, empty meadow. The absence of a narrative or "realistic" motivation elicits the search for symbolic meanings, but the film withholds any cues on this level too: if the locations are symbolic, there is no inkling of what they might connote.

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[46] I do not add *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*, and *Mia madre* to this list because in these three films the dancing scenes have some degree of plausibility within the storyworld: in *Dear Diary* the protagonist bumps into a midday open-air ball (chapter 1) and later on mimics Silvana Mangano's dance moves in a film (*Mambo*, dir. Robert Rossen, 1954) he watches on TV (chapter 2); in *Aprile* the dancing is part of the musical Nanni starts shooting in the final scene of the story; and in *Mia madre* it is a birthday celebration for one of the characters. It could be argued that in all these cases the dancing breaks the narrative flow, although *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* do not have much in the way of a story to be interrupted to begin with. (More on these films in chapter 6).

[47] Kristin Thompson (1988: 20) organizes motivation into four types: compositional (the device is justified by the narrative's own logic), transtextual (justified by the genre the work belongs to), realistic, and artistic (to affirm the specificity of art, that is, its very departure from naturalistic representation). Such types are non-exclusive: a device can be justified both by verisimilitude and the logic of the story, or both by genre and by the narrative's own logic, etc.

For Brecht, once we discard the pretence that the fiction is a sort of parallel world, other conventions can be done away with:

> Just as the actor no longer has to persuade the audience that it is the author's character and not himself that is standing on the stage, so also he need not pretend that the events taking place on the stage have never been rehearsed, and are now happening for the first and only time. (Brecht 1964: 194)

Ecce bombo literally enacts this principle. In an early scene, Michele and Silvia chat, but their exchange is so staged that she comments at one point: "I really enjoyed this one, shall we do it again?" As if this was a film shoot, they repeat the sequence; but Michele, forever discontent, concludes "the first one was better". Similarly, later on, at the end of a discussion in the male-consciousness group, one of them proposes they "look at the rushes" – a sentence which makes no sense within the diegesis, for the meetings are not ostensibly a film shoot. The group gatherings might be taken to imply that we are granted access to the characters' innermost feelings, but by making explicit reference to the fact that this is a film – not real life – the character "prevents the spectator from … imagining himself to be the invisible eye-witness and eavesdropper of a unique intimate occasion" (Brecht 1964: 58). In the scene between Michele and Silvia at the closed-down restaurant sitting on a bridge, the fourth wall convention is similarly discarded. Grabbing a pack of cigarettes, he extends it to her: "Would you care for a cigarette?", he asks, immediately adding: "Or, as Manfredi, who is the most shameless of them all, would put it – *Would you care for a cigarette?*" Michele turns the pack horizontally, facing the camera, to flaunt the logo. The reference here is to Nino Manfredi, another major star of the *commedia all'italiana*,[48] targeted for

[48] Manfredi (1921-2004) was a very popular actor who worked with the likes of Monicelli (*Big Deal on Madonna Street – I soliti ignoti*, 1958), Wertmüller (*Let's Talk About Men – Questa volta parliamo di uomini*, 1965), Ettore Scola (*We All Loved Each Other So Much – C'eravamo tanto amati*, 1974; *Down and Dirty – Brutti, sporchi e cattivi*, 1976), or Dino Risi (*Torture Me But Kill Me with Kisses – Straziami ma di baci saziami*, 1968; *I See Naked – Vedo nudo*, 1969). Manfredi would also direct a couple films himself, notably *Between Miracles* (*Per grazia ricevuta*), which won the 1971 Cannes prize for best directorial debut.

his allegedly blunt tactics of product placement.[49] Michele says and does things that are deliberately inconsistent with the fictional world he supposedly belongs to. The effect is similar to Godard's lines in *First Name: Carmen* (1983), which Cecilia Sayad cites as a prominent example of the disruption of the diegesis from within.[50]

From the beginning, Moretti was preoccupied with keeping front and centre the idea that a film is *not* a slice of life. He believed – and does so to this day – that to remind spectators of the artificiality of what they are watching is the first step any filmmaker must take. Behind this lies a political intention: as Schwartz points out, by showing that the actions performed in the theatre are not natural but conventional, Brecht hoped to bring home the notion that life itself, as we live it in the day-to-day, does not need to be the way it is.

> The audience … becomes aware of the constructed quality of the figures on the stage and, by extension, of the constructed quality of the reality they imitate and interpret. In underlining the extent of pretense in theatrical action, the extent to which it is a *made* thing, Brecht wants to demonstrate that the actions of everyday life also have a representational aspect, or else that outside of the theater the roles and the play could also be different … In reality, like in the theater, processes are *social* and, therefore, mutable. (Schwarz 2007: 28)

In interviews, Moretti evokes the impression Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's film *St. Michael had a rooster* (*San Michele aveva un gallo*, 1972) caused on him when he first saw it, even before he started making films himself. He emphasises those stylistic features which were there "to remind spectators – and the filmmakers themselves – that they were not being shown reality as such, but rather a representation, something of the level of the

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[49] In an interview, Moretti explicates his references to Manfredi and Sordi: "Dans *Ecce bombo*, je me moquais des acteurs qui se font de la publicité en montrant des cigarettes, par exemple Nino Manfredi qui présentait effrontément des Marlboro, ou encore je hurlais à un monsieur qui tenait dans un bar un discours poudjadiste: 'Tu le mérites, Alberto Sordi!' Dans *Je suis un autarcique*, … je faisais des plaisanteries à propos de Lina Wertmüller" (Gili 2017: 29).

[50] See my discussion of Sayad's ideas in the previous chapter, especially in the section titled "Disrupting the diegesis".

artifice."[51] Thanks to this, Moretti says, the film "was political, without being what is generally called political cinema."[52]

In Moretti's eyes, films that take politics as their subject-matter are too often marred by oversimplification and a dearth of self-reflection. The idea of making a different kind of political cinema is one that stuck with Moretti, a preoccupation that emerges again and again throughout his oeuvre. I will come back to this topic in the next two chapters, particularly in the analysis of *Palombella rossa*, *Aprile* (1998), and *The Caiman*.

Actors versus characters

In Brechtian terms, the historical features of a fictional story should prompt the spectator to ask herself what she might do if she were in the character's situation. This is not to suggest an essential similarity between character and audience, as if the fictional figure on the stage represented the quintessential human being. Much to the contrary, Brecht sees "identification" as a fraud – the fundamental fraud – that bourgeois theatre plays on spectators, inviting them to mentally retrace the steps taken by the character on the stage, to create the illusion that everybody would most naturally behave in a similar manner. Empathy supports this nefarious deception, and for that reason it must be avoided. In order to shatter it, we need to do away with the notion that the character herself could only have taken one path – that the story reveals the character's nature, *the way she is*. "It is too great a simplification if we make the actions fit the character and the character fit the actions," Brecht writes (1964: 195). The conventional theatre has been offering a false – idealized – image of people. To counter it, Brecht proposes a new kind of

[51] "*Q: Qu'est-ce que vous a frappé, en particulier?* A: Le choix de la caméra fixe, un style qui était là pour rappeler au spectateur (et aux réalisateurs eux-mêmes) qu'on ne leur donnait pas à voir la réalité, mais une représentation de la réalité, quelque chose de l'ordre de l'artifice" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 24).

[52] "C'était le refus d'un cinéma grossier, qui ne réfléchit pas sur lui-même … En plus, c'était un film politique sans être du cinéma politique" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 24).

character, which should neither be coherent nor unified.[53] Hence, he propounds:

> Imagine a man standing in a valley and making a speech in which he occasionally changes his views or simply utters sentences which contradict one another, so that the accompanying echo forces them into confrontation. (1964: 191)

A different kind of character demands a different style of acting. In the epic theatre, the actor will not try to embody the character's spirit; the attitude must be one of trying things out, as with a costume. "Aiming not to put his audience into a trance, [the actor] must not go into a trance himself," Brecht writes. At times Moretti echoes the German playwright even if he does not feel the need to spell out his name: in an interview on the occasion of *Palombella rossa*'s release, for instance, the filmmaker drops off as in a casual remark: "As an actor, I do not go into a trance when I perform."[54]

For Brecht, the spectator should be invited to contemplate the protagonist's actions from a critical distance; in order to do that, the actor must interpose a distance between herself and the character she performs: "[The actor's] feelings must not at bottom be those of the character, so that the audience's may not at bottom be those of the character either" (Brecht 1964: 193-194). Therefore, the actor's approach must not be rigid, but flexible:

> His muscles must remain loose, for a turn of the head, e.g. with tautened neck muscles, will "magically" lead the spectators' eyes and even their heads to turn with it, and this can only detract from any speculation or reaction which the gesture may bring about. (Brecht 1964: 193)

Directly prompted to say whether he subscribes to Brecht's views on acting, in a 2008 interview Moretti responds with implicit assent:

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[53] "Nobody can be identically the same at two unidentical moments … The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew" (Brecht 1964: 15). These are suggestive statements, and they are included in the standard English edition of Brecht's writings on theatre, but the question of their authorship is problematic: they are part of an interview Brecht gave in 1926, and the journalist who questioned the German playwright admits he "deliberately translated into normal language all that Brecht told me in his own manner, in Brecht-style slang" (Brecht 1964: 16).

[54] "Comme acteur, je ne suis pas en état de transe quand je joue" (Toubiana 1989b: 31).

> I like it – and I say this both as a spectator and as a film director – when, next to the character, one can see the person playing the role … Beside the actor who is focused on expressing a state of mind, I like to see the person who resists being totally engulfed in identification.[55]

These words are then directly echoed – seven years after this interview was published – by the fictional protagonist of *Mia madre*, who repeatedly instructs her actors (in the film-within-the-film) not to "disappear" into their roles – for she would like to "keep the actor beside the character". An underground exchange is going on between Moretti's characters and the director's own statements in interviews. This is not just the director commenting on the films: the fictional characters themselves speak to things Moretti had said earlier. Such examples confirm that the director's interviews are a relevant paratext for making sense of the films.[56] The fictional Margherita alludes to both Brecht and Moretti, even if she never goes so far as to explicitly utter their names.

"The actor appears on the stage in a double role," Brecht said (1964: 194). "[He] does not disappear in the [character] he is showing … [He] is actually there, standing on the stage and showing us what he imagines [the character] to have been."[57] By giving the protagonist of *Mia madre* the actual first name of the actor who embodies her – Margherita Buy plays Margherita – Moretti follows, as it were, the character's own motto: the fictional protagonist's name is a constant reminder of the presence of the real person. Furthermore, by creating a protagonist who is a film director – who doubles Moretti's real-life role, working as his surrogate – Moretti keeps *his own* directorial performance constantly in view.

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[55] "J'aime – et là c'est le spectateur tout autant que le réalisateur qui parle – quand à côté du personnage, je vois aussi la personne qui l'interprète. … Ce que je veux dire par là, c'est mon envie de voir, aux côtés de l'acteur qui se concentre dans l'expression d'un état d'âme, la personne qui résiste à la disparition de soi totale que cette identification pourrait susciter" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 59).

[56] See chapter 2 (above), especially the section titled "Distinctions between types of paratext".

[57] Brecht cites the example of Charles Laughton (1899-1962) in his own play *Galileo*, performed in Los Angeles and New York in 1947, under Joseph Losey's stage direction. Writing his manifesto "A short organum for the theatre" only a few months later, Brecht says: "The showman Laughton does not disappear in the Galileo whom he is showing … Laughton is actually there, standing on the stage and showing us what he imagines Galileo to have been" (1964: 194).

As often happens in his oeuvre, this *mise en abyme* has an ironic layer. At several points, the actors in Margherita's film seem bewildered by her Brechtian instruction; in a self-ironic twist, Margherita eventually confesses she is not entirely sure she knows what she herself means. By having Margherita make fun of herself in a directorial role, Moretti pokes fun at himself, as attested by the filmmaker's statements upon the film's release: "I don't tell my actors the same things Margherita does. I don't tell them the actor should stay side-by-side with the character. I don't say it, but that is something I constantly think of."[58] Again, he implicitly brings up the Brechtian sources of this idea by virtually paraphrasing the German playwright: "I don't like those performances where the actors identify so strongly with their characters that they disappear, both as actors and as people."[59] He also notes that Giulia Lazzarini, the actor who plays Margherita's mother in *Mia madre*, has a large experience of playing Brecht, and therefore – "She understands what I was trying to say – that is, what Margherita was trying to say."[60] The paratextual cues inviting spectators to see Moretti's fictional protagonists as stand-ins for the actual director are abundant.[61]

The *mise en abyme* was already overt in his debut feature, *I Am An Autarkist*. In the opening scene, even before the opening credits, we are introduced to Fabio (Fabio Traversa), a young theatre director trying to set up his first play. Desperate to find anyone willing to take part in his production, Fabio knocks on someone's door, and has it slammed in his face. Having no real actors at his disposal, he will be forced to make do with an assorted bunch of friends who offer him their time for no pay. Fabio's conundrum replicates, in satirical form, the difficulties faced by the real-life

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[58] "Je ne fais pas à mes acteurs les mêmes discours que ceux que fait Margherita. Je ne dis pas que l'acteur doit rester à côté du personnage. Je ne le dis pas, mais je le pense en permanence" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 14).

[59] "Je n'aime pas les performances des acteurs qui s'identifient tellement au personnage qu'ils disparaissent comme acteurs et comme personnes" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 14).

[60] "Ayant joué de nombreuses fois du Brecht – notamment *Mère Courage* –, elle comprenait ce que je voulais dire, c'est-à-dire ce que dit Margherita sur l'acteur qui doit être à la fois le personnage et en même temps se tenir à côté du personnage" (Gili 2017: 134).

[61] On the author's biography as a paratextual force, see chapter 2 (above), especially the sections titled "Who writes the legend?" and "Distinctions between types of paratext".

Moretti: the theatre play Fabio is trying to stage is a proxy for the film we are watching.[62] It is therefore unsurprising when, after trying and failing to persuade several people, the first person Fabio finds willing to take part in his play is Michele, the character played by Moretti. That Fabio is partly a stand-in for Moretti is made explicit in the film itself, in a scene where Michele turns to Fabio and says:

> You're always here, keeping an eye on me, eh? Always… I know! You're my alter-ego! Look, I just found an interpretative key… You could be my alter ego!

Fabio ignores the remark. Michele proceeds to pick up the phone and call his father to ask him for money: "Yes, same as usual. Like every month." When he hangs up, he turns again to Fabio and explains:

> Just in case someone asks, you know: [farcical tone of voice, implying a moralistic stance] "*But this guy… How does he make a living? Who pays for his bills? He has his own apartment, and yet he does not have a job…*" Now, Fabio, everything is transparent … But – listen – think about the alter-ego idea. I think it could be interesting – you know, as an interpretative key.

The joke performs several functions. To begin with, by evoking the questions a putative spectator might ask, Michele breaks the fourth wall, overtly revealing that the representation *is a representation*. Then, he casts the very notion of verisimilitude into ridicule, presenting the question "Who pays for his bills?" as a doubly moralistic request: one that not only stipulates that the young man (the character) should pay his dues to society by making a living in some "proper", "decent" manner, but also that the filmmaker himself should abide by accepted norms of "realism" and offer stories that seem plausible. Additionally, the joke plays on autobiographical transparency, for Moretti had *indeed* borrowed money from his father to

[62] In interviews, Moretti often recounts his embarrassment about having to depend on his friends' generosity to be able to shoot his early films, namely *I Am An Autarkist* and his previous, 50-minute short *Come parli, frate?* (1974): "Everyone had their lives, their own interests: one studied, the next was a journalist, another one was in medical school. Despite my stubbornness, it made me uncomfortable." "Il ne s'agissait plus de demander aux amis de me donner un jour ou deux de leur temps. Le groupe qui donne le spectacle a dû s'engager pour une longue période. J'étais vraiment déterminé, mais chacun avait sa vie, ses centres d'intérêt: l'un faisait ses études, l'autre était journaliste, un autre encore faisait sa médecine. Malgré mon obstination, j'éprouvais de la gêne" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 39).

shoot the very film we are watching.[63] Finally, the filmmaker pokes fun at critics, ostensibly offering them a key to interpret his work, as if he was saving them time.

In his initial features Moretti openly targets the Italian cinema of the time, satirically commenting on his own position within it. The unexpected popularity of *I Am An Autarkist* led him to be presented as the harbinger of a new generation, a notion he would then treat satirically in *Sweet Dreams* (*Sogni d'oro*, 1981), his third feature. In a debate that took place on Italian television (RAI) in the autumn of 1977 – precisely as Moretti was shooting *Ecce bombo* – he was cast against Mario Monicelli, the most important director working in the tradition of the *Commedia all'italiana*. Unambiguously evoking a boxing confrontation, the TV show was called *Match*, and purported to stage a generational clash, in which the 24 year-old Moretti challenged the 62 year-old Monicelli. The two filmmakers address each other directly, under just the most general supervision of a journalist. At one point, Moretti remarks: "I play the angry young man". As if in an echo of this debate, in *Ecce bombo* Michele will tell a TV reporter that Vito "is very good at playing the young man." The very opening sequence of Moretti's second feature establishes, as we have seen, an opposition between a pseudo-movie and Moretti's own brand of a "cinema of ideas," using this contrast to make fun of *both* genres.

As I have noted earlier, Moretti plays on autobiographical transparency, but this is not the same as being actually transparent: generally speaking, his films are fictions with strong autobiographical elements, but they should not be mistaken for documentaries.[64] Three distinct levels are at work: a fictional character (in the films) whose features echo the director's to some extent; an actor (Moretti) who embodies this fictional

[63] "*Q: C'est vrai que vous aviez, pour le réaliser, demandé à votre père un petit prêt?* A: Oui. Le film avait coûté 3 millions 300 000 lires. C'était dans l'absolu une somme importante, et énormément d'argent pour un film en Super 8" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 38).

[64] Chapter 3 (above) tries to situate the autobiographical element in Moretti's films against a larger spectrum of works (both filmic and literary) where the self-representational aspect is crucial. In chapter 6, I will look closely at three later films – *Dear Diary* (1993), *Aprile* (1998), and *The Caiman* (2006) – through this prism.

figure; and the filmmaker who writes the stories and directs the films. Both in the films and in his extracinematic comments, Moretti works to muddle – but not erase – these distinctions.[65] Merve Emre's observations on Elena Ferrante's case are pertinent here.[66] Emre writes:

> Literary anonymity, as Ferrante practices it, is … an expressive strategy. It has its styles and its goals, one of which is to multiply and muddle the distinct egos of the author: Elena as the writer of the Neapolitan novels; Elena as their first-person narrator; Elena as a commentator on the novels she has written … Armed with her anonymity, Ferrante has subsumed all traces of her life into an elaborate fiction and asked us, her readers, to help sustain its enchantment – to dissolve the boundaries between the Elenas until we can no longer disentangle fiction from reality or identify who among us is responsible for creating this enthralling state of affairs. (2020: 213)

Moretti seems to achieve a similar effect, even while dispensing with anonymity; much to the contrary, in his films of the 1990s he plays a character who goes by his own, actual name.[67]

In Moretti's early works, while the coincidence between the fictional protagonist's name and the filmmaker's is not perfect, the former is almost always a variation on the latter; in addition, Michele says and does things the actual Moretti believes in, as attested by interviews. Similarly, the majority of the characters in *I Am An Autarkist* bear the names of the actors who embody them: besides Fabio (Fabio Traversa), the protagonist's friends are Paolo (Paolo Zaccagnini) and Giorgio (Giorgio Viterbo); Michele's son is Andrea (Andrea Pozzi), and Beniamino Placido, a critic, plays a critic.[68] The close kinship between people in the film and people in the real world creates a

[65] In chapter 3 I have looked closely at Woody Allen's case for comparison: see especially the sections titled "Biographical echoes and spectatorial engagement" and "The Allen manoeuvre".

[66] For a brief description of the question of authorship in Ferrante, see the "Conclusion" to chapter 1 (above). Some implications are also discussed in Chapter 2 (above), in the section titled "Who writes the legend?"

[67] The question of this protagonist's identity in later Moretti films is one I will extensively discuss in chapter 6.

[68] The only two characters with a distinct, "fictional" name are Giuseppe (Luciano Agati) and Michele's girlfriend, Silvia (Simona Frosi). But, then again, the protagonist's romantic interests in all three of Moretti's first films are called Silvia, even if they are patently different actors, embodying different characters, with no narrative continuity between them. Coincidentally, Moretti's younger sister is actually named Silvia. Many years later, in the semi-fictionalized *Aprile*, Nanni Moretti's wife is also called Silvia, for it is Moretti's then wife Silvia Nono playing herself.

naturalistic effect the director sometimes reinforces in his interviews: "One thing that came very naturally to me from the very beginning," he states, "was to put myself not just behind the camera, but also in front of it, as an actor – *or, rather, as a person*" (emphasis added).[69] If Michele's friends are played by Moretti's friends (rather than by professional actors), this may create the impression that the actors in Fabio's (fictive) play are the *actual* people who feature in Moretti's film.[70]

Locations contribute to the same effect. To a large extent, the action takes place in the actual apartment where the director lived at the time (at his parents'); Michele's room (in the fictions) was Moretti's room. In *Ecce bombo*, although Michele's parents and sister are played by actors (not by Moretti's actual relatives), the table around which the family gathers is the actual dining table of the Morettis. In *Sweet Dreams*, for the first time the director uses a film set as the apartment where the fictional protagonist lives (with his mother), and yet part of the furniture that decorates the place again comes from the Morettis', and the books on the shelves by the side of Michele's bed are Moretti's actual books.[71] Even the fact that the protagonist of *Sweet Dreams* is a relatively accomplished filmmaker who still lives with his mother imitates the director's actual situation: despite being already a household name by then, Moretti was still living with his parents. In an interview in 1986, he would self-ironically declare:

> Four years ago I moved out of my parents' apartment – a bit late, to be honest: I was 29. It must be the regional record in Lazio: no one leaves their parents so late. But then, when I made *Bianca* and *The Mass is Ended*, I went back to my parents', because I did not feel like living on my own during the shooting.[72]

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[69] Interview dated July 2nd 2007 which accompanies the DVD edition of *I Am An Autarkist* as an extra.

[70] Of these, only Fabio Traversa went on to have a professional career in the theatre.

[71] "Dans *Sogni d'oro*, pour la première fois, l'appartement du film n'est pas celui de mes parents mais un décor, reconstitué en studio à Cinecittà. Toutefois il y a des résonances avec l'appartement de mes parents, notamment parce que certains meubles venaient de chez nous, comme la bibliothèque en teck qui se trouve au-dessus du lit, les livres aussi étaient les miens" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 58).

[72] "Il y a quatre ans, j'ai quitté l'appartement de mes parents – un peu tard en somme, j'avais vingt-neuf ans, record régional du Latium, personne ne quitte ses parents aussi tard – et lorsque j'ai tourné *Bianca* et *La messe est finie*, pendant la période des prises de vues, je ne voulais pas vivre seul, je suis donc retourné chez mes parents" (Gili 2017: 33).

In a Brechtian spirit, the inclusion of such tokens of reality may be taken to rupture the integrity and autonomy of the fiction – to reveal it as thoroughly artificial. To put it in Sayad's terms (discussed in the previous chapter), we could say that the biographical points outwards, refusing to be fully absorbed by the diegesis, thereby making plain that the fiction is not a life-like parallel world. The illusion is not self-sustaining.[73]

It is also conceivable, however, that these tokens of reality may end up *buttressing*, rather than discrediting, the integrity of the diegetic world. One consequence of the tight correspondence between things in the film and things in real life would then be a reinforcement of verisimilitude, in that what we see on the screen has its match in the actual world. The fact that Moretti always inserts himself in the films through some sort of alter ego can make the idea of a Brechtian *distance* between actor and character seem counter-intuitive. If this were the case, then – regardless of the filmmaker's intentions – the biographical element might be taken as an index of documentary realism.

Muddling these distinctions, Moretti also struggles with the consequences on occasion. In interviews, he candidly acknowledges that spectators do not always manage to separate his actual self from the fictional characters he embodies – a conflation that at other times he actively works to promote. Already in Moretti's first feature, a subtle slippage of meaning occurred, which led the first person of the title – *I Am An Autarkist* – to be understood as referring not to the fictional person in the story, but to the filmmaker himself. "I had the protagonist's situation in mind, his emotional and sexual self-sufficiency," Moretti states in an interview.

> *Moretti:* Emotional because at the beginning of the film his wife leaves him, and sexual… well, there's a masturbation scene, which I shot with the self-timer. It's a tight framing, but the scene is real, not faked. Later on, journalists and spectators would surmise that the title referred to the fact that I was the director, actor, producer, and screenwriter of the film, and in the end that interpretation prevailed.

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[73] See the section titled "Disrupting the diegesis", in chapter 3.

> *Question:* In hindsight, the title was taken to be your aesthetic and political manifesto.
>
> *Moretti:* Right. And that was a dislocation of meaning which suited me.[74]

On other occasions, the director strikes a less optimistic note. "Once the film is out, it no longer belongs to me. I can't go into the theatre and reproach people for laughing," he admits. "But the audience's reactions, their ways of experiencing and interpreting what they see, do surprise me sometimes."[75] Commenting on *Bianca*, the filmmaker recounts that some spectators would just plainly refuse to believe the protagonist to be a serial killer, even though they had just seen him confess to his crimes on screen a few minutes earlier. And this was frustrating, because the director's aim was not to portray Michele as a commendable figure:

> The film was showing at the "Eden" theatre, and I would pass by at the end of the screenings. People were just coming out after watching the final scene, where, in five minutes of shots and reverse-shots, I [the character] confess to the police chief that I am the murderer. The most affectionate spectators (whether affectionate towards me or towards my character I am not quite certain) would come to me and say: "Nah, you didn't do it! You just said that to save Siro Siri's skin. Your neighbour did it!" And yet my confession was fresh in their eyes, in their ears. All this to say how taken a part of the audience was with my character.[76]

Ironically, this is a problem Brecht himself also faced. The critic and literary scholar Hans Mayer (1907-2001) recalls that on the première of

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[74] "Je pensais à la situation d'autosuffisance sentimentale et sexuelle du protagoniste. Sentimentale, parce que sa femme le quitte au début du film et sexuelle… Bon, il y a aussi une scène de masturbation dans le film, je l'ai tournée avec le déclencheur automatique. Le cadre était serré, mais c'était véritable, pas joué. Ensuite, les journalistes et les spectateurs ont décidé que ce titre renvoyait au fait que j'étais réalisateur, acteur, producteur, scénariste du film. C'est donc cette interprétation qui est restée. *Q: On a dit plus encore:* a posteriori *ce titre a été considéré comme le programme esthétique et politique de Moretti*. A: Oui, c'est vrai. C'est un glissement de signification qui me convient" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 42).

[75] "Quand le film sort il ne m'appartient plus: je ne peux pas entrer dans la salle et censurer les rires. Même si les réactions du public, ou leur façon d'interpréter certaines images me surprennent parfois" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 47).

[76] "J'allais à la sortie du cinéma 'Eden', où le film était projeté. Les spectateurs venaient à peine de voir la fin, dans laquelle en cinq minutes de champ et contrechamp j'avoue au commissaire être l'assassin. Les spectateurs les plus affectueux – je ne sais pas si c'était envers moi ou mon personnage – me disaient: 'Mais non! Ce n'était pas toi. Tu as dit ça pour couvrir ton voisin, Siro Siri. C'était lui le coupable!' Ils avaient encore ma confession plein les yeux, plein les oreilles. Tout ceci pour dire combien une partie du public était pris par mon personnage dans ce film" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 70-71).

Mother Courage, in 1941, the playwright felt similarly frustrated – and not just about the audience's reactions, but also by the very actors' misunderstanding of the roles he intended them to play. In a spoken statement to a BBC show, in 1989, Mayer recounts:

> He had the impression that the performance had completely misunderstood the play, because we all… we are full of sympathy and pity with, and for, Mother Courage, and that was not at all what Brecht had had in mind. Later on [Brecht would say] … "I would like the spectators to understand that Mother Courage was very wrong not to understand the circumstances of her way of life." That is dialectical thinking. But even the first performers in Switzerland had indeed misunderstood this aspect of the great play. (Coe et al. 1989)[77]

After the War, Brecht went on to re-stage *Mother Courage* in Germany, with the Berliner Ensemble, and used this opportunity to introduce a number of changes that would further the emotional distance between characters and audience. In the same interview, Meyer explains:

> Mother Courage is not a tragic heroess [*sic*], but something different … She was far from being nice – a greedy, authoritarian personality… Until the end of the play she hasn't understood anything about her social and economic circumstances … She has lost everything – the children and the money – but she didn't learn anything … Of course she is unhappy, but not *that* unhappy because she is not even aware of her unhappiness …
>
> [Brecht] was writing dialectical plays, but the reaction and the response of the spectators was sometimes very different from what Brecht had … expected. (Coe et al. 1989)

These examples, from both Brecht and Moretti, demonstrate how artists' intentions can cast an instructive light on their artworks, even if we are not required to assume that the artworks mean what their authors wanted them to mean. Indeed, in these cases the gap that sometimes opens up between what the artist was trying to do and the interpretation that

[77] The interview can be retrieved at: Caetano, Alexandre. "Brecht on Stage 2." *YouTube*, 22 March 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAw3IoCbN3U.

ultimately prevailed is explicitly acknowledged.[78] Ironically, Moretti even admits that in some cases the discrepancy has worked to his advantage. He admits he does not control the way spectators apprehend his films, and even goes so far as to suggest he may not be the sharpest interpreter of his own work.

However, that does not mean Moretti won't try to influence the way his films are received. With regard to *Bianca*, the director insists he was aiming for something very different from a heroic protagonist. Meanwhile, if some spectators left the screening thinking that Siro Siri, not Michele, must have been responsible for the murders, their conviction is given at least a degree of plausibility by the film's internal features – for instance, by the fact that we never see Michele commit the murders, nor do we ever see the corpses, nor are we ever told how he would have done the killings. These aspects may not be enough to reassure us of the protagonist's innocence, but they do help preserve the spectator's allegiance to him to some extent. The director's extracinematic statements are not, in themselves, enough to prematurely close-off the issue of the protagonist's culpability. Statements of authorial intent are only relevant when compared with the artwork's internal features; and if the latter do not clearly intimate that Michele *is* the killer, perhaps we don't need to take the filmmaker at his word.[79]

Moretti's direct and indirect allusions to Brecht, in interviews, give credence to the hypothesis that the German playwright's work is a crucial framework for making sense of the films. In what remains of this chapter – but also in chapters 5 and 6 – my analysis will pay close attention to the kind of protagonists the films offer, and to the relationship Moretti tries to promote between these fictional creatures and the audience. This triangulation – the relationship between the actual Moretti, the fictional

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[78] On the distinction between "utterer's meaning" and "utterance meaning", see chapter 2 (above), especially the section titled: "Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis".

[79] In chapter 2 (above), I have compared the *actual* versus the *hypothetical* intentionalist positions on this issue with a somewhat analogous case in mind, that of François Ozon's film *Swimming Pool* (2004). See the section titled: "Actual intentionalism and the meshing condition".

protagonists, and spectators – is a central axis of my investigation. Moretti's implicit dialogue with Brecht will emerge again and again.

An absurdist title

Moretti's debut feature was never commercially released in English-speaking countries, and therefore it lacks a standard English title, but it is often referred to as *I Am Self-Sufficient*. Instead, I've preferred to keep the original "Autarkist", a word choice that sounds slightly quirky, both in English and in Italian, as the term is more commonly used to refer to a political doctrine than to an individual's situation. The concept is historically associated with Italian fascism, as the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic Eugenio Renzi points out:

> Originally, the word "autarchy" refers to the fascist economic model, whereby a nation aims to produce itself everything that is needed for its survival. The use of this expression by an openly left-wing filmmaker can only be ironic.[80]

For its part, *Ecce bombo* is untranslatable. "Ecce" is a Latin, not Italian word,[81] hence the phrase is an awkward composite of two languages; and while "bombo" can refer to a kind of bee, this is not a word in common usage, and most Italians would probably not be familiar with such a meaning. In English (on Amazon.com, for instance), the title has been rendered either as *Behold the Man* or as *Behold the Bumblebee*, overlooking the salient facts that "bombo" is no synonym for "uomo", and that no bumblebee is to be found in the film. In countries of Romance languages – such as France, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, or Argentina – counting perhaps on the audiences' relative familiarity with Latin, Moretti's original title has been maintained.

Moretti's title is obviously a pun on "Ecce homo," and using the original version has the advantage of keeping this aspect permanently in view.[82] The

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[80] "À l'origine, le mot 'autarcie' désigne le modèle économique fasciste, consistant pour une nation à produire elle-même tout ce dont elle a besoin pour sa survie. L'usage de cette expression ne peut qu'être ironique de la part d'un cinéaste ouvertement de gauche" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 240).

[81] The Italian word for "ecce" would be "ecco".

[82] The director acknowledges this association when he recounts his hesitations about the choice of the title: "*Ecce bombo* … suscitava poco consenso, ricordava 'Ecce Homo', sembrava blasfemo. Senz'altro se il film fosse andato male la colpa sarebbe stata del titolo" (De Bernardinis 2006: 7).

Latin expression can, in turn, be taken to refer to the words by which Jesus was exhibited, bound and crowned with thorns, to the masses before crucifixion, or to the title of Nietzsche's last book (1888), completed only a few weeks before the German philosopher plunged irretrievably into madness. Since Nietzsche's title is an overt riff on the biblical passage, by evoking Nietzsche, Moretti also necessarily evokes Christ. Nietzsche's title was a blasphemous provocation, and a shamelessly narcissistic one at that; the book itself adopts a tone that often borders on the messianic, if not outright delusional. Against its historical context, Moretti's title is doubtless less eccentric, but it still implicitly compares the director, screenwriter, and protagonist of *Ecce bombo* to both Jesus and Nietzsche, therefore carrying more than a whiff of grandiosity, arrogance, and even madness. The replacement of "homo" by "bombo", however, adds a level of self-derision that was arguably absent in Nietzsche (although this point is debatable).[83] The title of Moretti's even earlier short *Pâté de bourgeois* (1973) has a similar structure: it adapts the motto "épater le bourgeois" ("to shock the bourgeois"), only to undercut its transgressive intention with a prosaic nod to "pâté de foie gras".

In the film itself, the phrase "Ecce bombo!" occurs three times, and on no occasion does it have a precise meaning or a clear narrative function: an unidentified voice shouts it over the opening credits; a scrap metal dealer yells it while riding a bike; finally, one of Michele's friends, Vito (Paolo Zaccagnini), repeats it like a mantra before breaking a chair with his bare hands. Who the scrap metal dealer is, and what is his connection to the overall story, is a bit of a mystery: he had not previously featured in the film, and does not return after that particular scene. Sergio Rigoletto suggests that the character is an echo of Fellini's 1953 film *I vitelloni*. Although the (unnamed) man is entirely inconsequential from a narrative standpoint, he would fulfil an important role in linking *Ecce bombo* to its predecessor,

[83] In a recent biography of Nietzsche, Sue Prideaux describes *The Antichrist*, one of the several books the German philosopher wrote in 1888 (the same year as *Ecce Homo*), in the following terms: "As with much of his writing at this time, it is impossible to judge whether he is exercising extreme Swiftian satire or extreme seriousness, or if it simply represents a temporary spike in a graph tracking a mind that is growing unstable" (Prideaux 2018: 313).

thereby providing what is, in Rigoletto's estimation, the crucial intertext for making sense of Moretti's film:

> Like *Ecce bombo, I vitelloni* was a generational film recounting the collective experience of restlessness and discontentment of five male protagonists in their late twenties. The affinities with *I vitelloni* are evident in the very title of Moretti's film – *Ecce bombo* – inspired by the cry of a madman pushing a handcart along the beach … The "*Ecce bombo* loony" is clearly an allusion to the character of Giudizio in *I vitelloni*, to his mad crying, his handcart and his hut on the beach. (2014: 142)

The allusion is not quite as evident as Rigoletto implies, for Giudizio himself is a very minor character in *I vitelloni*.[84] Additionally, while the intertextual link might account for the presence of the scrap metal dealer in *Ecce bombo*, it does not explain the particular phrase he yells, which is nowhere to be found in Fellini's film. When it comes to elucidating the title of Moretti's film, we are therefore back to square one.

Over the years, in interviews, Moretti has evoked a story to account for his title: around the time he was making *Ecce bombo*, someone told him about a ragman who went around shouting this odd phrase, or at least shouting something that sounded like it; Moretti liked the expression, and decided to adopt it for his title. In any event, he says he had only "a horrible alternative": "*Sono stanco delle uova al tegamino*" – something like "I'm tired of fried eggs." (Needless to say, the film does not feature any eggs.) "That's the reason for 'Ecce bombo'", Moretti concludes: "just a sound."[85]

Such protestations should not be taken at face value: an artist is under no strict requirement to transparently disclose her motives – in case, that is, she is able to remember them correctly.[86] To start with, Moretti's versions on the question of the title are not always consistent. In a longer interview, published in book form in 2008, he admits he considered other possibilities,

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[84] "Giudizio" is Italian for "judgment": the character's name is clearly ironic.

[85] "Mi avevano raccontato di uno straccivendolo che andava in giro urlando così. Avevo un orribile titolo alternativo: "Sono stanco delle uova al tegamino". Ecco perché Ecce bombo: solamente un suono" (d'Agostini 2006). Moretti had told a similar version in an interview included in a 1986 book (*apud* De Bernardinis 2006: 7).

[86] For some of the challenges involved in gauging authorial intentions, see the Conclusion to chapter 2 (above).

implying the choice had not been that capricious. The project for what eventually became *Ecce bombo* came out of three separate stories: "*Delirio d'agosto*" ("August delirium"), which dwelt on the protagonist's promiscuous sexual life; "*Piccolo gruppo*" ("Small group"), which focused on the group of male friends; and a third story, which told of a love triangle between a (male) university teacher, one of his (male) students, and the latter's girlfriend. While the first two tales made their way into the finished film, the latter (no more than two or three pages-long) was never developed.[87] Moretti says he considered using one of the titles he had for the first two stories for the film as a whole. Even the "horrible" title about the eggs was not as meaningless as he had previously implied, but rather "a way of hinting at the fact that I [i.e., the fictional protagonist] spend the summer alone in Rome and can't really cook," Moretti now conceded.[88]

Moreover, Moretti's claims about the meaninglessness and arbitrariness of his title bring to mind the Dadaists' version of how they came to name their own movement. Such a coincidence is hardly fortuitous, given how often the Dadaists are cited in Moretti's early films. According to the lore, the German psychoanalyst and writer Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974) simply plunged a knife into a French dictionary, which by pure chance landed on the word "dada," and thus the name was born. Of course, such an anecdote never stopped people from discussing the meanings of "Dada", any more than Moretti's little tale about fried eggs has stopped anyone from interpreting the title of his film. At one point, in *Ecce bombo*, Michele and his friends call a girl on the phone and, instead of speaking, they anonymously play a song on the record player. When the prank ends, Mirko (one of the gang) defensively observes: "Even the Dadaists were not understood at the beginning." The

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[87] An early scene of *Ecce bombo* has a family resemblance with this story. Michele, his sister, and their parents gather around the lunch table when, out of the blue, the father says: "You wouldn't believe it: I saw two young guys kissing outside a school today. Two guys: a boy kissing another boy." No one reacts, they move on to a different topic. In his interview with Chatrian and Renzi (2008: 45), Moretti says this homosexual love story was "somewhat inspired" by John Schlesinger's 1971 film *Sunday Bloody Sunday*.

[88] "Il y avait quelques alternatives. Deux avaient un rapport avec le sujet de départ, *Delirio d'agosto* et *Piccolo gruppo*. Un autre en revanche était vraiment mauvais: *Sono stanco delle uova al tegamino!* C'était je crois pour évoquer le fait de rester seul, à Rome, l'été, et que je ne sais pas vraiment cuisiner grand-chose" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 51-53).

implicit suggestion – that the group's trifle shenanigans are somehow equal to one of the most significant avant-garde movements of the 20th century – is typical of the kind of brazen self-aggrandizement that pervades *Ecce bombo*: a self-conceit so shameless it performs its own ironic takedown.

The affinity young Moretti felt with the earlier absurdists had a political angle too. Emerging amidst the unprecedented carnage of World War I, the Dadaists thought mainstream art had become complicit – not just in content but also in form – in the disasters of the age. In order to challenge prevailing pieties about progress, beauty, and propriety, they embraced nonsense, irrationality, childishness, and absurdity. The art they produced was meant to be a sort of anti-art, to challenge the very distinction between art and non-art, and to upend the entire system of bourgeois values (Kovács 2007: 16-17).

Major differences notwithstanding, there are points of contact between the Dadaists' worldview and the way Moretti saw his own context. The late 1970s were a very tense period in Italy, with constant rumours of coups and counter-coups, and founded fears for the survival of the democratic regime itself. Overall, the situation in Southern Europe in the mid-1970s was far from stable. Spain was just initiating its transition to democracy, after the recent death of the military dictator Francisco Franco (1892-1975), who had ruled the country for the previous four decades. Franco's anointed successor, Luis Carrero Blanco, had been killed in a car bombing in December 1973. As late as 1981, the Spanish military would attempt a rebellion against the democratically-elected parliament. Greece was emerging from a vicious period under the rule of a military junta, and the years 1974 to 1980 were marked by successive coups and counter-coups, with significant American meddling. Portugal had had its democratic revolution in 1974 (an event briefly alluded to in *Ecce bombo*), but it also had its share of military

conspiracies in the years 1974 to 1976.[89] In the backdrop there was Chile, where in 1973 General Augusto Pinochet, abetted by the US government, had led a military coup that brought to an end the elected government of Salvador Allende. For the hopes it had raised and for the brutal way in which they were terminated, Chile represented a formative experience for left-wingers the world over. It is a topic Moretti has returned to, decades later, in his recent feature-length documentary, *Santiago, Italy* (2018).

It is no exaggeration to say that Moretti shared in the gloom and historical pessimism of his absurdist predecessors. The atmosphere of political violence played a central role in the feelings of impasse, irrationality, and hopelessness that marked the period in which *Ecce bombo* was made. With this in mind, the Italian scholar Luana Ciavola has suggested the "bombo", in Moretti's title, would hint at the terrorism – from both right and left – that scarred Italy in the late 1970s. Political violence was such a crucial phenomenon of the Italian political landscape that this period is generally referred to as the *anni di piombo* (literally: the "years of lead"). Ciavola naturally concedes that "bomba", not "bombo", is the Italian for bomb, but she argues that this anomaly can itself be meaningfully interpreted: by changing a vowel, Moretti would have purposefully "twisted" the word "bomb", thereby signalling the meaninglessness of terrorism as a political strategy.[90] Her argument is grounded in the belief that the emptying out of language's meaning – and, in particular, the deterioration of the left's political vocabulary in the late 1970s – is the central theme of the film.

Although I find Ciavola's thematic understanding of *Ecce bombo* to be pertinent in many ways, it is important to note the film contains no direct reference to political terrorism at all, and that Moretti has never established

[89] "The situation in southern Europe in 1975 and 1976 was the cause of considerable disquiet to the United States. Portugal was in the grips of revolution, in Spain the end of Franco's regime was imminent, in France a united left seemed to be on the brink of power, Greece and Turkey were at loggerheads over Cyprus, and now in Italy the DC seemed to be about to lose power to the Communists. It was little wonder that *The Economist* at the time called the Mediterranean the soft underbelly of NATO" (Ginsborg 1990: 373).

[90] "*Bombo* is reminiscent of *bomba* (bomb): in a period haunted by bomb blasts – the decade of the 1970s – the changing of the vowel and the resulting strange neologism underline how the signifier could be easily twisted and the word devoid of content; the resulting nonsense discloses an empty signifier indicative of the sense of uselessness of the revolutionary strategy" (Ciavola 2011: 135).

a connection between his title and the phenomenon of political violence. While *Ecce bombo* makes many allusions to contemporary fads and public figures, it conspicuously omits any references to political events. This omission is deliberate: it means something in the story. The director states:

> [The film] tried to avoid as much as possible any reference to current affairs. My characters live as if in a fishbowl: no one ever mentions a single event taking place in the period in which the film is set.[91]

Moretti's film speaks *to* its political moment – in ways I will elaborate on below – but it makes its points in an oblique manner.[92]

Ciavola's hypothesis is further discredited by Moretti's statement that, by the time the film was shot and released, he was not even aware that a section of the left had embraced political violence. He says he had been working on the assumption (shared by many others in his circle) that terrorism was a tactics of the far-right, which had (certifiably) managed to infiltrate parts of the army and the secret services, and would also have infiltrated far-left groups.[93] According to this argument, left-wing terrorism would provide the perfect pretext for a right-wing crackdown, and that is why the far-right, deeply embedded in the secret services, would have a vested interest in stimulating violence. The realization that sincere left-wingers had conducted kidnappings, bombings, and murders came to Moretti as a shock, a feeling he compares to the one life-long Communists would experience in 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down: something that shakes one's political convictions to the core. In a 2003 article for the Italian left-wing magazine *Micromega*, Moretti writes:

> My personal Berlin Wall fell when I read the confessions of the murderers of the red terrorism in the papers, and realized they really came from the left.

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[91] "[*Ecce bombo*] cercava di essere il meno possibile sull'attualità. I personaggi dei miei film sembrano vivere in un acquario, non si parla mai di un avvenimento accaduto in quel periodo in cui è ambientato il film" (De Bernardinis 2006: 48).

[92] See the next section: "*Ecce bombo* as a political film".

[93] Moretti says he only realized that Aldo Moro had actually been kidnapped and murdered by left-wing people two years after the event – a full two years, that is, after *Ecce bombo* was released. More on this topic below. "Deux ans après [la séquestration et de l'exécution d'Aldo Moro], il y a eu la découverte que les membres des Brigades rouges n'étaient pas des agents des services secrets, mais qu'ils étaient issus de la gauche" (Gili 2017: 111).

> That was something that, in my stupid naiveté, I had thus far not realized – and mine was a very widespread attitude. … To learn, at the close of the 1970s, that the Red Brigades were not some “Martians” from the secret services, but people who had actually come from the Left – people who in the 1960s had taken part in the Communist Youth Federation, people on the Catholic Left, old members of Potere Operaio, younger folks from Autonomia Operaia – for me, that was a real blow.[94]

Therefore, even in the doubtful chance that the word “bombo” might carry a vague, somewhat remote association with bombs in the minds of some Italian spectators, the theory that “bombo” is a “broken” word by which Moretti intended to convey the flaws of the terrorist strategy looks implausible. It simply does not “mesh” – to borrow Paisley Livingston’s concept, discussed in chapter 2 – with what the director has plausibly claimed his mindset was when he made the film.[95]

Finding the explanations offered for Moretti’s title ultimately wanting, it occurred to me that we could be in the presence of yet another double entendre: when the director says that “Ecce Bombo” is “just a sound,” does he mean it is just *any* sound, or might he be hinting at some sound in particular? It came to my attention that the word “bómbo” can be found in dictionaries as referring – albeit in a literary sense – to a specific type of noise. While pointing out this is not current in everyday language, the encyclopaedia Trecanni presents the word as a synonym for “rimbombo” (roll, rumbling), “ronzio” (buzz, humming), or “rumore cupo (del tuono, delle artiglierie),” the sombre clatter of artillery or thunder.[96] When Moretti said the title was “just a sound”, could he have been making a pun? Was *Ecce bombo* meant to produce the sound of thunder, of artillery?

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[94] “Io, nella mia scema ingenuità, non l’avevo capito, e questo era un atteggiamento molto diffuso. Il crollo del mio personale muro di Berlino fu quando capii, leggendo sui giornali le rivelazioni dei primi pentiti, che gli assassini del terrorismo rosso venivano dalla sinistra. … scoprire, alla fine degli anni Settanta, che i brigatisti non erano dei marziani dei servizi segreti ma persone che venivano dalla sinistra, quello sì fu un vero colpo. Persone che avevano militato nella Fgci negli anni Sessanta, nella sinistra cattolica, ex militanti di Potere Operaio, i più giovani che venivano da Autonomia Operaia” (*apud* De Bernardinis 2006: 20-21).

[95] See chapter 2, particularly the section titled: “Actual intentionalism and the meshing condition”.

[96] See voice for “Bómbo,” undated, treccani.it, Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana. [http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/bombo1/]

As noted, in some parts of Italy "bómbo" also refers to a bumblebee (genus: "bombus"); additionally, it is phonetically close to "bombone"[97] (or "sbombóne"):[98] a buffoon, someone who tells big tales or is a braggart.[99] Both "Behold the buffoon" and "Behold the bumblebee" could self-referentially refer not just to the fictional protagonist, but also to the filmmaker, in a way akin to *I Am An Autarkist*: such irony and metareferentiality, such combination of the grandiose and the derisive, would become Moretti's self-deprecating style of humour. The filmmaker displays a consistent propensity for word play and for combining the erudite with the mundane, hinting at things both profound and superficial.

While the meanings listed above for the word "bómbo" are admittedly literary uses, of which many, or perhaps most, Italian spectators would be unaware, it is also true that Moretti comes from a highly literate background: his father, Luigi, was a professor of Greek Epigraphy at the University of Rome, while his mother, Agata Apicella, taught both Latin and Ancient Greek at the secondary school level. This feature is in evidence in several films, notably *The Son's Room* and *Mia madre*, with affectionate scenes where parents and children gather to study Latin. The professional vocation is, moreover, a defining trait of the protagonist's mother in *Mia madre*, a fictional character who is avowedly inspired by Moretti's own mother. The director's older brother, Franco, is currently one of the major scholars in literary studies worldwide, while his younger sister, Silvia, is a professor of history of architecture with a background in medieval literature. As the Italian film critic and occasional Moretti collaborator Tatti Sanguineti jokingly points out: "The Morettis have never left school."[100]

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[97] See voice for "bombone" in Aldo Gabrielli, 2015 (3rd ed.), *Grande Dizionario Hoepli Italiano*. [www.grandidizionari.it/Dizionario_Italiano/parola/B/bombone_1.aspx?query=bombone+(1)]

[98] See voice for "Sbombóne," *n.d.*, *Dizionario Treccani*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. [http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/sbombone]

[99] "Chi racconta grosse fandonie o fa vanterie esagerate." See voice for "Sbombóne," *n.d.*, *Dizionario Treccani*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. [http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/sbombone]

[100] Interviewed in Susanna Nichiarelli, 2007, *Pubblico di merda*, a 22-minute short on the making of *Sweet Dreams* which accompanies the DVD edition. Sanguineti plays the assistant-director to Michele Apicella in *Sweet Dreams*, and will later on play a film critic, under the name of Beppe Savonese, in *The Caiman*.

While one cannot say for sure what Moretti meant by the title, his family background makes it hard to believe that the fact that "bómbo" is literally a sound is some sort of meaningless coincidence of which the director himself would have been unaware. An offhand remark, made many years later in an interview on the occasion of the release of *The Son's Room*, illustrates his high level of literary alertness for the nuances of words and titles. Alluding to the original title of his 2001 film (*La stanza del figlio*), Moretti notes: "The word *stanza* in Italian has also another meaning, even if no one thinks about it anymore: stanzas, for instance Petrarch's stanzas."[101] The fact that the director admits his title carries echoes most spectators will likely not catch is noteworthy. As William Tolhurst pointed out, an author may make whatever demands he likes on an audience as to the breadth of references such an audience will need to command in order to make sense of some aspect of the work. There may even be cases where nobody, at the present moment, has the ability to grasp what the author is hinting at:

> It is … possible that at a particular time there might be no qualified readers for a particular work and thus that there is no actual person who is a member of the intended audience of that work. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility of a reader becoming a member of the intended audience. (Tolhurst 1979: 12)

When we try to elucidate the possible meanings of "Ecce bombo", we are not targeting a meaning as it resides in the author's mind, and to which Moretti would therefore have exclusive rights of access. In keeping with the distinction Jerrold Levinson underscores between "utterer's meaning" and "utterance meaning", the understanding we strive to discern is public.[102] However, that does not mean it needs to be easily accessible. The information I draw on to clarify the possible meanings of Moretti's titles – not only here, but also with regards to *Palombella rossa*, in the next chapter – belongs to the

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[101] "Et puis le mot *stanza* en Italien signifie aussi quelque chose d'autre, même si plus personne ne s'en souvient: stances, par exemple les stances de Pétrarque" (Jean A. Gili, 2001, "Raconter de façon urgente la mort d'un être cher", reprinted in Gili 2017: 100).

[102] See particularly the section titled "Authorial intentions: building a hypothesis", in chapter 2.

public record, even if it is relatively obscure. It draws primarily on the work's historical context and the author's biography, as Tolhurst recommends:

> Although it does seem illegitimate for an author who is not writing to intimate friends to expect his reader to have a detailed knowledge of his (the author's) life, *this would seem to be ruled out by ordinary prudence* rather than the nature of utterance meaning … An author may make whatever demands he likes; but if they are unreasonable, it is unlikely that they will be met, that anyone will take the trouble to read and understand him. Since authors do, in general, hope to be read and understood, if not now then in the future, they will not require an unduly esoteric base of knowledge and experience in their readers. (1979: 12-13 – emphasis added)

In sum, the title "Ecce bombo" is a whimsical, seemingly arbitrary choice with several layers of self-referential implication, entirely appropriate for a film that is rife with ironic metacommentary.

Ecce bombo as a political film

Ecce bombo's characters are too consumed by the trivial dramas and torments of their unremarkable lives to engage in any sustained, collective effort. But it is precisely this triviality, the inconsequentiality of both the characters and the story, that makes pointed political commentary, in its historical context. The film acutely captures the sense, not merely of disappointment, but of confusion, bewilderment, and loss the Italian left was going through in the late 1970s. The pointless babbling, the recurring non-sequiturs, and what one may generally call an aesthetic of interruption in the film's narrative structure become paradoxically eloquent. "*Ecce bombo* abounds in silences and absence of speech," Ciavola writes (2011: 126). "The aphasia and meaninglessness reflect the void after the revolution … everything had already been said."[103] In Ciavola's eyes, the simple interruption of discourse can gain oppositional force under the prevailing political circumstances.[104]

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[103] Ciavola uses the term "revolution" rather loosely to refer to the events of 1968.

[104] "Lacks and gaps in the language and the meaninglessness of the discourses are the ways through which a critical resistance to the symbolic discourse of the social order is expressed, an order that in the film is depicted to have absorbed the revolutionary formulae. The lacks and gaps would be the way through which … Moretti … could articulate a desire for revolt" (Ciavola 2011: 127).

Similarly, Bonsaver notes that in this film "Moretti would sometimes drop the tempo with extremely long takes, without any dialogue, where the lingering depression of his young left-wing characters was given adequate cinematic representation" (2001-2002: 174).

One of the main threads of the film re-enacts something Moretti plucked from his own life. A few years earlier, at the age of 20, he and some of his friends had formed a so-called "male consciousness-raising group". The director recounts:

> The idea of the male-consciousness group … came out of a personal experience I had gone through with four of my friends, in 1974. We had two things in common: we had taken part in small political groups of the radical left, from which we had in the meantime taken our distances, and we were all seeing feminist women at the time.[105]

Such groups, which mirrored the feminist project of exploring patriarchy on a personal level, were not unusual. "Liberation was not to be postponed until after the revolution, but was to start in the sphere of the private, in everyday relationships between women, men, and children", Paul Ginsborg describes (1990: 368). The group meetings in Moretti's film therefore speak to the political circumstance on both the personal and the public fronts. On the one hand, Michele and his friends are disenchanted in their political outlook, disengaged from political activity in a conventional sense; on the other, their malaise is also a commentary on the state of play in gender politics. As Rigoletto points out, "The problems that these young men have to tackle do not simply revolve around their disillusionment with the revolutionary aspirations of 1968 but also have much to do with the shifting nature of their relationship to women" (2014: 130). This speaks to major social changes that were taking place in Italy at the time: divorce had just become possible for the first time in 1970; the principle of equality between spouses was enshrined in law in 1975; abortion would become legal in 1978.

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[105] "L'idée du groupe de prise de conscience … était le fruit d'une expérience personnelle en 1974, avec quatre de mes amis. Nous avions deux choses en commun: *primo*, on avait milité dans des groupes extraparlementaires avant de nous en éloigner, *secondo* nous avions tous des femmes féministes dans nos vies" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 45).

The Italian student movement erupted onto the scene in the autumn of 1967 (earlier than its more famous Parisian counterpart), when Moretti was 14 years old – too young, by the filmmaker's own account, to be paying any real attention. Within a couple of years, many students veered towards a general questioning of bourgeois values, joining factory workers in great industrial strikes, and resurrecting revolutionary hopes which in Western Europe had been dormant for decades. In Italy (as in France), Marxist groups were created of various stripes and manners, but often in opposition to the local Communist parties, for both the PCI and the PCF were too well-inserted in the democratic game, and too deferential towards the Soviet Union's priorities, to have their strategy inflected by the vagaries of spontaneous rebellions. Left-wing radicalism found its model not in Russia but in the Cuban and North Vietnamese resistance to American imperialism, as well as in Mao's (much misunderstood) Cultural Revolution in China. The USSR, led by a clique of ageing bureaucrats, had lost any romantic aura, which attached instead to Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, and even Mao Zedong. The Chinese leader was associated with epic feats, such as the Long March of 1934-35, in which he had personally guided an army of roughly 100,000 people on foot across a distance of 5,600 miles. The "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) fired the imagination, too, its metaphorical slogans assembled in a collection of political epigrams, the *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (aka *Little Red Book*), whose actual political meaning and real human cost were often not well known or grasped; judging by its name alone, a "cultural" revolution might have sounded like a rather benign affair.[106]

In Italy, some of these leftist groups (*Potere Operaio*, *Il Manifesto*, *Lotta Continua*) acquired a significant following: in the early 1970s, in a city like Milan, they might be able to gather 20- or 30,000 people at a demonstration, according to Ginsborg (1990: 360). However large such movements were, though, they were not strong enough to fundamentally impact, much less radically transform, Italian politics. Deprived of a

[106] The *Little Red Book* makes a campy appearance in *Sweet Dreams*, in a scene I will discuss in the next chapter (in the section titled "A political film yearning to be a musical").

meaningful connection with political practice, many of these activists became puritanically preoccupied with establishing the "correct line", and rapidly ossified into dogmatic positions. The expression of individual differences was treated as a bourgeois sin, and in this regard the groups failed to speak to the needs and concerns of the vast majority of students (or young workers, for that matter). Moretti recounts from personal experience:

> After 1968, while still in high school, I took part in the crystallization of the student movement into small groups whose real vocation was to criticize and indeed hate the small group next door. It was a very ideological affair … Personally, I was never very ideological: I wasn't what one would then call a 'Marxist-Leninist'.[107] At the beginning of the 1970s I landed in a group which was slightly less dogmatic than the others: we were not even Maoists. Of course I shared in the same sectarian mindset that was integral to that kind of activism, and in fact, to this day, I still feel a sort of allergy towards the other groups, especially the more ideological and radical ones (the Stalinists and the Maoists).[108]

Moretti's first project for a feature film, *Militanza, militanza…* (something like *Activism, Activism…*), co-written with his friend Giorgio Viterbo, told the story of a small group in the process of becoming a political party.[109] However, Moretti was unable to find the funding to shoot it, eventually settling on the less demanding, more artisanal idea for *I Am An Autarkist*. Later on, after the unexpected success of this debut feature, he would be given the chance to produce the earlier script, but he says the eruption of the 1977 protests had changed the context, and the story of *Militanza, militanza…* had become dated: "I had written it in 1975, and it

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[107] The so-called "Marxist-Leninists" were the Maoists, who used this label to set themselves apart from the larger, Soviet-aligned, official Communist Parties, who in their view were "revisionists".

[108] "Comme lycéen, j'ai participé à l'après-68, à la cristallisation du mouvement dans les groupes extraparlementaires dont la spécialité consistait à critiquer, sinon à détester, le groupe extraparlementaire d'à côté. C'était une façon très idéologique de faire de la politique … Je n'ai de toute façon jamais été hyper idéologique: je n'étais pas ce que l'on appelait un 'marxiste-léniniste'. Au début des années soixante-dix j'ai atterri dans un groupe un peu moins dogmatique que les autres, on n'était même pas des maoïstes. Bien sûr, je subissais comme tout le monde le sectarisme de ce militantisme-là, il m'en reste aujourd'hui encore une certaine allergie aux 'autres' groupes, surtout ceux qui étaient trop idéologiques (stalinistes et maoïstes), ou extrémistes" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 20).

[109] Viterbo plays Giorgio in *I Am An Autarkist*, the reporter for Telecalifornia in *Ecce bombo*, and the history teacher in *Bianca*. I have chosen to translate *Militanza, militanza…* as *Activism, Activism…* because the Italian word "*militanza*" does not share the violent connotation its English counterpart "militantism" carries.

spoke about the groups that had been formed in the wake of 1968. The 1977 movement had completely changed the landscape."[110]

Militanza, militanza… would have been addressed to the high tide of revolutionary hopes, but *Ecce bombo* speaks to a different moment. The revolutionary impulse, born in the wake of 1967-68, had fizzled out: even as the PCI moved towards more centrist positions, in the context of its strategy of "Historic Compromise", the far-left failed to make significant electoral gains.[111] Some acknowledged this failure by simply dissolving: *Potere Operaio* ended in 1973, *Lotta Continua* in 1976; others, with the road to power blocked, transitioned into direct, terrorist action, epitomized in the kidnapping and eventual killing of the former Prime Minister Moro. "The myth of imminent revolution was … a direct emanation from '68. When the revolution did not arrive, it was not surprising that some militants decided that a final, supreme voluntarist act would provide the necessary short cut," Ginsborg writes (1990: 361). For those – like Moretti – who would not subscribe to the violent path, the terrorist turn only compounded the sense of defeat. Coming out exactly eight days after Moro was kidnapped, *Ecce bombo* is very timely in the way it articulates the historical moment, even if it makes almost no reference to current events.

For many who had gone through an early, formative period of intense political commitment, the mid-1970s were therefore experienced as something of a void. In *Ecce bombo*, Michele and his friends strive to find ways to incorporate a sense of political commitment into their everyday lives, but an episode symbolically hints at their disorientation: they spend the night

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[110] "Soudain, le scénario de *Militanza, militanza…* me paraissait daté. Je l'avais écrit en 1975, et j'y parlais des groupes formés au lendemain de 68. Le mouvement de 1977 avait complètement changé le contexte" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 44).

[111] The rift between the PCI and the movements to its left, which emerged in 1968, would only deepen throughout the 1970s. In the mid-1970s, the leader of the PCI, Enrico Berlinguer (1922-1984), offered a pact to the parties to its right, the Socialists and the Christian-Democrats. According to the terms of this "Historic Compromise", the Communists would refrain from opposing the government in parliament; additionally, after the kidnapping and subsequent killing of the Christian-Democratic leader Aldo Moro, the PCI took a step forward, offering open parliamentary support to the government led by the Christian-Democrat Giulio Andreotti. The Historic Compromise is a crucial context for understanding *Palombella rossa*, and I will therefore return to this topic in the next chapter, in a section titled "In Berlinguer's shadow".

at the beach waiting for the sunrise, only to see it occur behind their backs.[112] The anecdote plays an ironic inversion on a historical trope of socialist propaganda, that of socialism as a new dawn, which would be evoked again in *Palombella rossa* (see next chapter).[113]

In *Ecce bombo*, the political project Michele and his friends confusedly aim for is spelled out by Mirko (Fabio Traversa) in what he calls "an opening speech". "For me, the sun we waited for so long that night at Ostia, and which then popped up behind us, was a signal, an invitation to understand," Mirko says.

> These days I feel we got almost everything wrong. We are sort of bored, sort of disillusioned, sort of tired. We stopped being politically engaged, and that's a good thing: it's as if we had been relieved of a weight. Now we are trying to have fun. But I feel kind of down, mostly because I'm not having fun. We must do something – not like now, when everyone minds their own business and no one helps the others. I feel we got it all wrong: in our relations with women, with ourselves, with school, with our families, with work. I would like us to really talk, to try to change ourselves, to become different from our grandparents – to be revolutionaries in a real sense, in the day-to-day.

Mirko's aspirations are lofty – but how is the spectator supposed to feel about them? The speech is underscored by sentimental nondiegetic music, a sentimentality that seems to ironically discredit rather than reinforce it.[114] The proclaimed desire to be "revolutionary in the day-to-day" is "teasing and contradictory," Ciavola (2011: 128) notes, given that the group spends practically their entire time in a room, cushioned off from all external realities. Michele interrupts Mirko's monologue at one point to exclaim "right!", though his lack of enthusiasm is so evident the compliment sounds almost sarcastic. The others seem apathetic, and Michele in particular looks

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[112] This scene from *Ecce bombo* actually featured in the script for *Militanza, militanza…* already.

[113] The place of such symbols in Communist mythology is very salient. Notice for instance that the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain was from 1966 onwards titled the *Morning Star*.

[114] In interviews, Moretti confirms that early in his career he would use music mostly to undercut the overall emotional tone of a scene, in Brechtian fashion. As time went by, his attitude about this has become more flexible, he suggests: "Pendant un moment j'utilisais les chansons en contraste avec un certain ton de la scène, maintenant je ne sais pas. … Parfois elles sont en contraste avec la scène, parfois elles sont ajustées au ton de la scène" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 18).

bored, his eyes roaming aimlessly around the room. As soon as Mirko finishes, Vito suggests that, in order to be together, they might as well set-up a basketball team, or a magazine, or a barbershop; whatever they do, Vito contends, should be named after a historical date. He immediately offers the options of July 14th, September 20th, or June 15th.

Vito's remark is dry and cutting. His proposal is a satirical – yet deadpan – take on several tendencies present in Italian Marxist groups of the time: the nostalgia for a mythical past; the facile tendency to equate the current situation with historical and revolutionary moments; the obsession with living in constant communion with others, the group's specific aims taking second place to the mere desire to be together. When Michele then complains that "all dates are already taken", he is implicitly hinting on the fad to name small groups after historical episodes; but then the irony extends to the dates themselves. July the 14th and September 20th stand for major historical occasions (the French Revolution of 1789, on the one hand, and the Capture of Rome in 1870, leading to the final phase of Italian Unification, on the other), whereas June 15th refers to a comparatively minor one, the Italian regional elections of 1975. Those elections were remarkable in that the left-wing parties, taken together, garnered 47% of the vote, and the Communists, with 33%, trailed behind the centre-right Christian Democrats by a mere two points. Over the next year, there was much talk of a "*sorpasso*" ("overtake"), the tantalizing prospect of seeing the Communists become the largest party in Italy. It was the first time in the post-war period when Conservative rule seemed imperilled; as it turned out, it was also the last. From 1975 onwards, the PCI suffered unrelenting electoral decline, all the way to its dissolution in 1990, a topic I will address in the next chapter.[115] By the time *Ecce bombo* was shot, in late 1977, the idea that the left might attain power at the national level had turned into a distant dream. The juxtaposition of the revolutionary

[115] A decade later, in the elections for the European Parliament of June 1984, the PCI would indeed come first place, even if by a very slight margin (33.33%, against the Christian Democrats' 32.96%). However, these were what political scientists call "second-order" elections, with no direct effect in the formation of the national government, and their political significance was further diminished by the fact that the result was widely perceived to be a direct effect of the public commotion caused by Berlinguer's sudden death just six days prior to the poll.

dates with some regional elections would have always been ironic, but it was an especially bitter irony given this dismal context.

The solemn opening session of the group ends in farce: Vito suggests they should adopt a collective yell, like basketball teams use for motivation. The camera takes him in close-up, focusing on his deranged facial expression, and he screams violently, whilst the rest of the group looks on unperturbed. In another meeting, Vito also breaks a chair with his bare hands. Such seemingly random aggressive gestures are most likely a nod to "primal scream therapy", a brand of psychotherapy that was fashionable at the time, as a response to the perceived limitations of "talking cures".[116]

Therefore, the array of cultural and political practices *Ecce bombo* satirizes vastly surpasses the cinema. Moretti chastises in his own generation a tendency for narcissism, for vapidness, for romanticizing the past, and for wallowing in their own misery. The group discussions we watch are inane, and yet Mirko believes they "bring up experiences that are typical of the petite bourgeoisie. We could have this printed by Savelli. They like this kind of thing."[117] In the night episode, at the beach, Goffredo suggests: "While we're waiting for the dawn, couldn't we begin those meetings Mirko proposed? Talk about us, our relations to women, talk about us, talk about us..."

Intimacy and politics in *Ecce bombo*

Michele and his friends desperately long for women, but they are too coy to engage with them. At one point, they call a girl on the phone whom they have only seen once, and, instead of speaking, they loudly play for her a segment of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Tosca* (1899) on the record player ("E lucevan le stelle", sung by José Carreras). As they listen to the music, for once a glimpse

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[116] The underlying theory held that, since language is a higher cognitive function, traditional psychotherapy is not effective at dealing with early trauma; instead, the patient should be invited to act out, through screaming and body language, considered to be more direct routes to early traumatic memories. Such violent discharges were believed to be cathartic, although its therapeutic effectiveness remains contested to this day. In the early 1970s, primal therapy was endorsed by a number of public figures (including John Lennon and Yoko Ono) and left its mark on Ingmar Bergman's film *Face to Face* (*Ansikte mot Ansikte*, 1976).

[117] This is a reference to Samonà e Savelli, possibly the most important publishing house for the Italian radical left in the 1970s.

of emotion is registered on their faces, the camera capturing each of them in close-up as they sing along with the recording, with longing expressions, in ecstatic trance. They are pathetic, both ludicrous and somewhat moving, as they are unable to articulate any feelings of their own: the moment the record stops playing, they hang up, partaking in a very aggressive, exaggerated, incongruous laughter. Observing the situation from the threshold of the room, Olga (Lina Sastri) tells them they should reach out directly to the girl, talk to her; but "she would not understand," they retort.

In *Ecce bombo*, the topic of gender relations is particularly in evidence in Michele's interactions with his family and with a number of women he is more or less romantically attached to. These two threads of the story run in parallel – Michele's female friends never meet his family – but they largely point in the same direction: despite his intentions, he is clueless and oblivious about his own behaviour, repeating many of the patterns he criticizes in his parents' generation.

One evening, Michele arrives home from one of his awareness-raising meetings to find his father (Glauco Mari) playing cards with friends in the living room, while the mother (Luisa Rossi) is in the kitchen, drinking. The mother looks like the archetype of the frustrated housewife, dishevelled, constantly wearing a smock, and with deep dark circles around her eyes. All alone, she whines: "Poor me, always at home, frustrated." Seeing her in this state, Michele scolds her for being drunk. She asks him where he has been, and he tells her about his group: "You know, like these groups where people meet to discuss things we normally don't speak of, like the feminists…?" The mother does not know. "– I see," Michele says. "So none of this makes sense to you?" "– Not at all," she retorts. "– There: nobody understands it," he notes with resignation. In Rigoletto's estimation, Michele's very attitude towards his mother in this scene gives the lie to his efforts at feminist self-

awareness.[118] It is also possible that, even in her drunken state, she is more alert to her own blind spots than Michele is. However prototypical, the mother is not exactly weak: she is entirely able to speak her mind, and at times does not refrain from calling her son "stupid" or "an idiot" to his face.

Michele proceeds to go speak to his sister, Valentina (Lorenza Ralli), whom he chastises for staying out late, and for her compulsive need to be surrounded by her pals: "Can't you ever just stay home and read a book?" Again, the irony is transparent, for his jabs perfectly describe his own behaviour; later on, alone in Rome for the duration of the summer, Michele exhaustively peruses his phonebook, in a desperate attempt at finding someone to hang out with.[119] Quashing his inner doubts, Michele grandiosely mentions to his sister the "political project" he is carrying on with his friends, which he contrasts with her supposed frivolity. But his concerns about her social life also belie a latent sexual panic. Valentina enlightens him: "You know, sisters have a sexuality too. And so do parents, in case you didn't know." He feigns utter shock, and reproaches her for swearing – something we had previously seen him doing profusely at lunch, with the family gathered around the dining table.

In contrast to the mother, Michele's father is feeble, entirely at a loss about how to deal with the family. At one point he tries to bond with his son by commenting on the looks of female dancers on TV: "Michele, let's see if you and I have a similar taste. Of those three dancers, I prefer the one on the right. Which one do you prefer?" Michele does not even bother to acknowledge the question. The father has a pathetic streak: after yet another family squabble, we see him sitting on a sofa, alone in the room, covering himself entirely (head included) with a blanket. The scene is short, and not directly

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[118] "The irony is that, in unsuccessfully sharing with his mother the meanings of a practice that should establish his affiliations with feminism, Michele is actually revealing his distance from his mother's predicament and hence from the pro-feminist sensibility that he so unconvincingly flaunts" (Rigoletto 2014: 132).

[119] Rigoletto makes this same point with regards to Michele's reprimands of his girlfriend, Silvia: "Much of the irony within the film stems from the fact that each critique articulated by Michele eventually rebounds on him. At one point, we see Michele attacking Silvia for her desire to be always surrounded by other people, except that throughout the film it is precisely Michele who seems unable to be on his own" (2014: 139).

connected with what comes before or after it, but it brings to mind a little child who would cover his eyes in the hope of not being seen.[120] Michele likes to challenge his parents – his father especially – in order to cast himself as the defender of his sister's rights; "but," as Mazierska and Rascaroli point out, "he does so only in order to subvert their authority, and exercise his own instead" (2004: 55). When, for instance, Valentina wants to take part in an all-night sit-in at school and her parents are reluctant to consent, Michele accuses them of being secretly concerned only about her virginity; but then he himself questions his sister, asking, with ill-hidden anxiety, what does she do with her friends all night.[121] "Only I can bawl out Valentina," he shouts at his mother. To his great shock, however, his sister does not welcome the meddling: "you are the problem", she tells him.

Rigoletto reads Michele's hostility towards his father (he even slaps his father across the face at one point) as a reflection of the protagonist's subliminal anger at himself:

> Whilst the father … crystallises the image of the old male code that Michele is attempting to supersede, Michele's resentment towards him seems to externalise the frustrating perception that this young man may be inescapably connected with this past, and its old gender codes and norms. (2014: 138)

Michele's ability to express affection in the presence of women, or even to discuss romantic feelings with his friends, seems particularly stilted. With Silvia, his girlfriend, he often engages in a kind of push-pull behaviour. Early on, he sits with her at a café, first telling her to leave, then pleading with her to stay, and finally letting her go. When she has to temporarily leave Rome for work, Michele begs her not to go, but never actually expresses any positive

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[120] "Throughout the film, Michele's father appears confused and helpless … and responds by withdrawing ... The father seems to be an emotionally inarticulate man … During two arguments at the dinner table, he prefers to run away and sit alone in the living room. On one occasion, he even covers himself up with a blanket" (Rigoletto 2014: 137).

[121] The idea that it behoves a young man to watch over his sister's sex life – or rather, to make sure she doesn't have one – features prominently in *I vitelloni*. A subplot in Fellini's film revolves around the discomfort felt by the protagonist, Moraldo (Franco Interlenghi), about his sister's romantic liaison with his friend Fausto (Franco Fabrizi). The fact that Moraldo is unable to prevent Fausto from seducing his sister Sandra (Leonora Ruffo) and making her pregnant puts him in a difficult position towards his father. Then, once Sandra and Fausto get married (at her father's behest), Moraldo is left to uneasily observe Fausto's perpetual philandering.

feelings for her. He sees her off to the train station solely to try to prevent her from leaving; when she does, he runs after her, snaps the bag off her hands, and throws it into the trash bin. While he makes no pretence of being reasonable, her reaction is of seemingly endless patience: she fondles the back of his head almost motherly.

In the farewell scene at the train station, Michele actually acts out both his own voice and Silvia's, as if he was having a dialogue all by himself. Something similar will happen later on, when he meets Flaminia, who is married to Cesare (Maurizio Romoli). The fact that Cesare is a friend of his does not stop Michele from instantly deciding he is in love with Flaminia. Still, when they first meet he barely looks at her, and instead waits for the moment when he is by himself, sitting on his bed, to conjure the words he wants to say. All alone, Michele experiments aloud with various ways of articulating his feelings:

> You intimidate me. You really intimidate me and… I am in love with you. Could we meet and talk a bit? However, I feel tongue-tied, you really intimidate me. [Stops himself, tries a more assertive tone.]
>
> I am in love with you.[122]

In the next scene, he calls Flaminia on the phone. As soon as she picks up, he does a little tic with the head, a nervous grin, and, without missing a beat, delivers a sequence of sentences, as if they were all the possible ways of saying the same thing. He gives her no opportunity to respond:

> Hi, how are you? I am a little tongue-tied… I wanted to ask you if you could fall in love with me? I wanted to ask you if we could meet so you would fall in love with me? [More solemn.] I am in love with you. I'd like to talk to you. [Nervous laughter.] I am very tongue-tied, you really intimidate me.

The conversation ends right there, giving us no access to Flaminia's reaction. However, in the following scene the two of them are together at the beach: Michele is still talking, Flaminia is still listening.

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[122] This scene echoes a gag from *I Am An Autarkist*, where Fabio is seen speaking on the phone, until it eventually becomes clear there is no one on the other end of the line: he is just rehearsing the words he will say to a theatre critic.

When the topic is sex, Michele's conversations take a particularly awkward turn. Pleading with Silvia for her not to leave Rome, he abruptly says: "Stay! We have such great sex." She looks at him as if startled, and does not respond. We barely ever see any physical contact between the two of them. Later on, he has the most convoluted exchange with Flaminia. As she sits on a bed, he kneels down, a few meters away, without the faintest sign of physical intimacy between the two. The ensuing dialogue is like a maze, a back and forth of incomplete sentences with the most distorted logic. Flaminia: "If there is a reason, then I don't think we should do it; if there is no reason, I don't see why not." Michele half closes his eyes, as if he was making a tremendous effort to follow her words.

That the young males of *Ecce bombo* form a group portrait is, in Rigoletto's estimation, no coincidence: as mentioned earlier, Rigoletto reads the film through the prism of *I vitelloni,* another collective snapshot of male youths of a previous generation.[123] In his interpretation, Moretti's film conducts an undercover conversation with Fellini's. As evidence for this, Rigoletto points to the concluding sequence of *Ecce bombo*, when Goffredo and Mirko stop by an open ballroom, and the first of them observes: "Very Fellini, isn't it?" In Rigoletto's eyes, it is not merely the quaint scene they observe which has a "Fellinian" quality: the two friends themselves are "Fellinian", i.e., latter-day replicas of the young men of *I vitelloni*. Goffredo and Mirko had set out to pay a visit to Olga, a friend of Mirko's who is psychologically unwell, but they get distracted by the scene and fail to make good on their plans. In Rigoletto's appraisal, the superficial conviviality prevents them from a real human engagement:

> Far from simply being one of the many ironic cinematic references Moretti introduces in his early films, this allusion [to Fellini] calls into question the implications lying behind the atmosphere of joviality and togetherness that distracts the characters on their journey to visit Olga. (2014: 142).

Another echo of *I vitelloni*, it seems to me, can be found in the opening session of the male consciousness-raising group, when Mirko suggests: "Does

[123] See the section "An absurdist title", above.

anyone want to explain why they left their hometown?", only to immediately add, as if hit by a sudden realization: "But we are all from Rome!" Within the film's diegesis, the remark seems baffling; it is only as an indirect echo of *I vitelloni* that it makes sense. Set in Rimini, a provincial town on the Adriatic coast, in the early 1950s, Fellini's film recounted the lives of five young men and suggested that small-town narrow-mindedness and the dearth of life prospects numbed both the characters' intelligence and moral sense. *I vitelloni* contained – like *Ecce bombo* – an avowed autobiographical element, Fellini being originally from Rimini. A quarter-century later, Moretti's young drifters are trapped in a similar combination of weariness and tedium. However, whereas Moraldo (Franco Interlenghi), the protagonist of Fellini's film, escaped the stifling conditions in which he had been stuck by boarding a train to Milan in the final scene, that is an option Michele and his friends lack, since – as Mirko laments – they are from Rome already.[124]

Rigoletto reads the ending of *Ecce bombo* as offering a different and more promising way out than the protagonist's escape at the end of *I vitelloni*. One last time, Michele and his friends gather, significantly in the same room where Michele's father had earlier met with his friends to play cards. The setting seems to hint at an essential similarity between the two generations, "consciousness-raising" being in the end (as Vito had implied) nothing but a pretext for hanging out, no better or worse than playing cards. Each member of the gang has different plans and they decide the time has come for the consciousness-raising exercise to terminate. As they part ways, they decide to go see Olga – all of them but Michele, who says he is not in the mood for keeping company with someone who is depressed.

Once they disperse, word of mouth swiftly – and implausibly – spreads across cafés and bars, so that suddenly dozens of people are united in their determination to pay Olga a visit. However, for one reason or another, they all get distracted; paradoxically, and with no explanation, in the film's final

[124] One of the protagonists of Fellini's film is played by the same Alberto Sordi who is so reviled in *Ecce bombo*. *I vitelloni* is one of the early triumphs in the Roman actor's career.

scene the only person who shows up at Olga's is Michele. The two face each other, not muttering a word. Rigoletto describes:

> A close-up focuses on her gloomy face. The following shot is another close-up of Michele, who appears confused and upset. Standing in silence in front of Olga, Michele slowly turns his eyes towards her. In this silent confrontation with Olga and her experience of sorrow and isolation, Michele faces the unknowingness of what it may mean to be a new man and to establish a new kind of relationship to another human being. (2014: 143)

These expressions – "a new man", "a new kind of relationship" – may seem lofty and somewhat ethereal, but they perfectly tie-in with the way Moretti often describes the kind of cinema he cared for, especially at a young age. I have quoted him earlier: "Those films encouraged us to think about both cinema and society. Those filmmakers were looking for a new kind of cinema and new kinds of human relations," he has said on more than one occasion.[125] Indeed, if we accept Rigoletto's contention that *Ecce bombo* is (amongst other things) an investigation into what it meant to be a young man in Italy in the mid-1970s, then the consciousness-raising group that takes central place in the story is a form of *mise en abyme*, the group's explorations doubling those of the film itself.[126]

In this final scene, Michele is at last not talking *about* women as an external object, but trying to communicate *with* one. That Olga is the catalyst for this crucial change is of course no coincidence: she is the same girl who had previously – in the scene with the telephone and the record-player – invited the group to drop their silly antics and approach the young woman they liked directly, without a mask.[127] Moreover, her constantly unsmiling poise marks her as somewhat alien to the atmosphere of superficial

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[125] See the section on "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody", above.

[126] "An inward-looking male perspective constitutes one of the most remarkable features of the Italian cinema of the 1970s. With the endorsement of a subject-centred point of view, open to explore issues concerning the realm of the personal and sexuality, this historically specific mode establishes the conditions for looking at masculinity as an object of epistemological investigation and as a political problematic" (Rigoletto 2014: 127).

[127] In Rigoletto's estimation, "[Olga] seems to ask these young men to face, without the armour provided by their camaraderie, a reflection on the true stakes of a human relation based on empathy and mutual respect" (2014: 141).

camaraderie which is otherwise prevalent.[128] In Rigoletto's view, the male group in *Ecce bombo* works as a "shield" against feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability. Contrary to its avowed intentions, it does not promote personal change, but rather blocks it:

> By showing how easy it is for Michele's friends not to follow through on their initial plan to visit Olga, the film reveals the gap that separates a collective experience of social transformation – with its shouted slogans and ideals – from the real costs that such a quest for change implies at an individual level. (Rigoletto 2014: 143)

The silence in the final scene contrasts with the verbiage that preceded it, and which had consistently been associated with inconsequentiality – as it will be, once again, in *Palombella rossa* (see next chapter).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shed light on Moretti's early work, particularly *Ecce bombo*, by situating it against its historical context, the relevant aesthetic frameworks, and the way Moretti works with self-representation. Both the historical context and the aesthetic frameworks work on a film via the agency of actual human beings. Or, to put it concretely: the reason why information about Italian society and politics in the mid-1970s casts light on *Ecce bombo* is that Moretti made a film out of the thematic materials that were available to him, and also because he set out to address the moment. Similarly, if art cinema (as a mode of narration) and Brechtianism are important for understanding *Ecce bombo*, that is because these two traditions moulded Moretti's sense of aesthetic possibilities, and also because he deliberately engaged this legacy. To demonstrate that Moretti's films converse with these traditions and mean things in response to this particular historical moment, I have looked closely at both the films and the director's statements. Of course, Moretti is under no oath to disclose the "true meaning" of his works, and he

[128] "Instead of indulging in her solitude, [Olga] seems to search for viable channels of socialisation. At one point, she telephones a number of friends just to talk with them and open her heart. The response she receives is one of embarrassment and awkwardness. One of her friends, after hanging up, wonders whether she has gone mad" (Rigoletto 2014: 141).

wouldn't be able to do so if he tried: not all of his decisions as a filmmaker are conscious, and he will not be able to retrieve all of them. While statements of authorial intent do not substitute for film analysis, they can give us precious indications if they are put side-by-side with the work itself, and assessed against other sources.

Of course, even if we did not have much information about the real-life filmmaker and his (stated) intentions, we might still be able to establish that these are the relevant historical and aesthetic referents for making sense of this film; we would still have built hypotheses about the way historical circumstances and aesthetic premises bore on the work. But the fact that we have plenty of material on the real-life Moretti, and about what he was trying to do, helps us put such hypotheses to the test. The usefulness of this comes out vividly, for instance, when we compare the claims some scholars have made about the possible meanings of *Ecce bombo*'s title with what we can assert about the director's plausible mindset at the time.[129] The interpretative work stands to gain from historical research – and the author himself is a crucial element of the context from which the work arose.

Moretti keeps the biographical constantly in view, both by inserting myriad autobiographical echoes in the films and by underscoring these via paratextual mechanisms. The latter comprise "epitextual" cues, such as his public statements, which he invariably offers on the release of each new film; and also "peritextual" ones, for instance the logo of his film production company which appears with the opening credits of the later works.[130] The repeated inclusion of this logo – a stylized image of Moretti, seen from the back, riding his scooter – from *Dear Diary* (1993) onwards creates a sense of familiarity, the recognition on each occasion that we are about to watch another Moretti product.[131] But to recognize the autobiographical elements is

[129] See the section titled "An absurdist title", above.

[130] I am following Gérard Genette's categories. A section of Chapter 2 (above) is devoted to "Distinctions between types of paratext".

[131] Earlier on I have considered the logo of Moretti's film production company (and its different avatars) within a discussion of directorial self-inscription in film. See the section titled "Disrupting the diegesis" in Chapter 3 (above),

not the same as to presume a confessional disposition, and the fact that the director inserts biographical cues should not be read as a promise of autobiographical transparency.

In trying to show that *Ecce bombo* speaks to a political moment in Italian history, I've built upon the work of several scholars who had already argued that, while the film keeps close to individual characters and does not pay direct attention to large social institutions, it is at this most personal level that it accomplishes a portrait of social consequence. In this, I think, lies the key for *Ecce bombo*'s large historical resonance, for the mark it has left in collective memory in Italy: the trifle dramas of the film's characters are politically significant. Of special importance is the group of young men at the centre of the narrative, whose consciousness-raising initiative is predicated upon the notion that personal experiences can be transformative, but whose efforts in the personal sphere are just as ineffective as they are in the political arena. The young men of *Ecce bombo* are stuck, and this gives the film a strong undercurrent of sadness. "I never liked the cliché of the 'comedy that makes you think'," Moretti quipped in 1986. "Therefore, a few years ago – I think it was for *Ecce bombo* – I've replaced it with the 'comedy that makes you suffer'."[132] Interestingly, this statement carries yet again a Brechtian ring. In an undated set of observations on the Dutch painter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569), the German playwright had written:

> Such pictures don't just give off an atmosphere, but a variety of atmospheres. Even though Brueghel manages to balance his contrasts he never merges them into one another, nor does he practise the separation of the comic and tragic; his tragedy contains a comic element and his comedy a tragic one. (Brecht 1964: 157)

That the group avowedly reflects an autobiographical experience does not mean that Michele *is* Moretti, or that the director reads his ordeal in the same way the character reads *his*. "This is the world I knew," the director has stated. "I was fond of it, but I could also see its shortcomings, its foibles, the

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[132] "Qualche anni fa, dato che non mi piaceva la formula del film 'divertente che fa pensare', la sostituì (mi sembra per *Ecce bombo*) con quella del film 'divertente che fa soffrire'" (*apud* De Bernardinis 2006: 6).

way the younger generations echoed archaic dynamics and behaviours, for instance in the relations between men and women."[133] It is clear that the narration does not partake in the limited self-awareness of the protagonist. All the while, in his extracinematic comments, Moretti generally refrains from passing judgment on his characters; much to the contrary, he often insists on rhetorically confounding the various levels – the perspective of the narration, the protagonist's perspective, and his own views as he retrospectively comments on the films – through the use of a single, undifferentiated first person. Understanding the degrees of distinction and overlap between the film, the character, and the filmmaker, as well as the relationship each of these entertains with the audience, is a crucial prism for my analysis of Moretti's later work, in the remainder of this dissertation.

In the next chapter I will look closely at *Palombella rossa* (1985), a film that stands on the threshold of a different stage in Moretti's oeuvre. The specific challenges that film raises are naturally different, as it speaks to a different historical moment and to new thematic concerns. But not only do the methods by which I cast light on the film remain essentially the same; art cinema and Brechtianism are still the major aesthetic frameworks against which Moretti makes his choices, and I will keep on referring back to them. As should be clear by now, I do not conceive of these as some set of guidelines Moretti would mechanically apply, but rather as aesthetic problems he works through, traditions with which he is engaged as in a conversation.

[133] "Je connaissais ce monde, je l'aimais bien, mais j'en voyais aussi les limites, les velléités, la reproduction par les nouvelles générations des dynamiques et de comportement archaïques, comme, par exemple, dans les relations homme/femme" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 44).

Chapter 5: **The Ambivalence of Political Commitment (on *Palombella rossa*)**

> If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself.
> (Orwell 1957 [1946]: 157)

Introduction

The fourth and fifth feature films in Moretti's career, *Bianca* (1984) and *The Mass Is Ended* (*La messa è finita*, 1985), were made in uncharacteristically quick succession. Atypically, also, Moretti worked with a professional screenwriter (Sandro Petraglia) for both of these films, something that is readily apparent in the more straightforward narratives that characterize them. Before shooting his next feature, to be released in the autumn of 1989, Moretti created his own film production company, producing the debut features of Carlo Mazzacurati (*Notte italiana*, 1987) and Daniele Luchetti (*Domani accadrà*, 1988). By Moretti's own testimony, "perhaps the wish to create Sacher Film was also – though not consciously so at the time – due to the fact that I didn't feel I could make another film straight away."[1] And it is the director himself who suggests that the 4-year gap between *The Mass is Ended* and his next film, *Palombella rossa*, could signal the closing of a period in his oeuvre. Nonetheless, he hastens to add he "wouldn't want to be schematic about this."[2]

And we cannot be schematic because the various stages in Moretti's career are not watertight, as he often goes back, at a later point, to things he had tried earlier: in 2001, he would aptly describe his career as "a route that

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[1] "Après *La messe est finie*, peut-être que l'envie de me lancer dans la production, de créer la Sacher Film m'est venue – ce n'était pas le résultat d'un raisonnement – parce que je sentais que je n'aurais pas réussi à faire tout de suite un autre film" (Gili 2017: 43-44).

[2] "Je ne veux pas être schématique et dire qu'avec *La messe est finie* s'est clos un cycle. Quoi qu'il en soit, *Palombella rossa* [est] un film qui veut être plus libre" (Gili 2017: 44).

moves forward with both continuities and breaks."[3] Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli see *Palombella rossa* as a "liminal" work, "between the dark and negative irony of the first part of Moretti's career and the lighter and more positive irony of [*Dear Diary* (1993) and *Aprile* (1998)]. In this film, in fact, the mood seems to lift slightly" (2004: 108).

Palombella rossa is the ostensible endpoint for a period in Moretti's career in that it is the last instalment in the Apicella series. In the filmmaker's own account, the film enacts "the destruction of my old character, who has forgotten his own identity and relies on others to figure out who he is."[4] The very title of Moretti's previous work, *The Mass is Ended*, hinted that the preachy protagonist of the earlier films was exiting the stage, perhaps to give way to a more uncertain figure. At the same time, however, *Palombella rossa* was not from the outset conceived to be the last Apicella project. According to the director, on the eve of making his following film, two years later, he was still working on the idea of yet another Michele vehicle.[5] On the other hand, if we consider it in terms of its narrative structure, *Palombella rossa* has a closer kinship with the work of young Moretti than with its immediate predecessors: while *Bianca* and *The Mass Is Ended* form relatively smooth narratives, *Palombella rossa* is an intricate jigsaw puzzle.[6] This seems to be directly connected with the filmmaker's decision to revert to his previous method of writing the script on his own. At first, Moretti enlisted Petraglia's collaboration for a third consecutive project (after *Bianca* and *The Mass Is Ended*), but when the screenwriter sent him a version of the script, the director was dissatisfied: it was, he said, "a disaster".

> It entailed a way of narrating that did not allow the film to be entirely personal and free: free from the constraints of conventional screenwriting, which always

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[3] "Non so ancora quale sarà il mio prossimo film, e quello ancora dopo, quindi un percorso che va avanti con continuità insieme a strappi, etcetera" (Bonsaver 2001: 173).

[4] "*Palombella rossa* … est un peu la destruction de mon ancien personnage, qui avait oublié sa propre identité et avait besoin des autres pour savoir qu'il était" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 58).

[5] "À la fin de 1991, j'ai en tête un sujet qui ressemble davantage à mes films précédents, un film dans lequel il y a le personnage de Michele" (Gili 2017: 60).

[6] "L'architettura del racconto, che aveva raggiunto una compattezza di taglio tradizionale nei due film precedenti, *Bianca* e *La messa è finita*, sembra nuovamente esplodere nelle forme di un puzzle, assai più intricato, meno lineare e rigido che in passato" (Parigi 1998: 313).

> expect everything to be explained and to fall neatly into place by the end. Thus a new period began, in which I felt the need to tell stories *in a less realistic* and more personal manner, with *Palombella rossa*, *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*.[7] (emphasis added)

Under the circumstances, Moretti started shooting *Palombella rossa* with a more improvised approach, handing scenes and dialogues to the actors on a day-to-day basis, and with some leeway for changing them on the fly. It is as if, in order to move forward, he was going back to the looser narrative structure of his early films. At the same time, *Palombella rossa* evinces a desire to experiment with storytelling which will continue to be prominent in Moretti's work of the next two decades – particularly in *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*, and *The Caiman* (2006). A central aspect of this narrative experimentation is the fact that he seems to have various, competing film projects in mind at any given time, and instead of choosing one over the others decides to leave an explicit trace of several of them in the films themselves.

Such an indecision will be directly dramatized in *Aprile*, where the protagonist (a filmmaker under the name of Nanni Moretti) is torn between making a documentary about Italy's current political situation and an escapist, musical film; it is constitutive of *Dear Diary*, a film composed of three independent segments (and where the idea of making "a musical about a Trotskyite pastry cook" is first adumbrated); and it is crucial to the narrative structure of *Palombella rossa*, which is – avowedly – a "composite" of disparate elements.[8] Again, the novelty of this approach needs to be qualified, since the earlier *Sweet Dreams* (1981) already comprised the juxtaposition of three different stories. On one level, it recounted the life of its fictional protagonist, the young filmmaker Michele Apicella – who shared a

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[7] The idea that *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* are "less realistic" is surprising and counterintuitive, and I will scrutinize it in detail in the introduction to the next chapter. "En fait j'ai tenté d'écrire *Palombella rossa* avec un scénariste, et ça a été une tentative désastreuse, car c'était une façon de raconter qui ne pouvait être totalement personnelle et libre, libre des mécanismes d'un scénario qui veut toujours expliquer et faire en sorte que tout se tienne. Ainsi a commencé la période durant laquelle je sentais le besoin de raconter sur un mode moins réaliste, mais plus personnel, plus libre: *Palombella rossa, Journal intime, Aprile*" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 14).

[8] This is an idea Moretti often emphasizes in interviews at the time of *Palombella rossa*'s release. "Il s'agit … d'un film délibérément composite fait de matériaux différents les uns des autres" (Gili 2017: 47).

number of biographical traits with the actual Moretti. A second level was formed by the film Michele was making ("Freud's Mama") within the story, about a man who thinks he is Freud – and whose troubled relationship with his mother echoes that of Michele with his mother. Finally, a third level was composed of Michele's nightmares – the "sweet" dreams that give Moretti's film its title – where the fictional protagonist leads a parallel live, his facial features differ, and he ends up turning into a werewolf. The final scene of *Sweet Dreams*, in fact, takes place in this alternate reality.

Moretti himself avows that behind *Sweet Dreams* was the idea of making a film encompassing a pastiche of several genres.[9] One of such genres was the musical, included via a minor subplot: an extravagant film-within-the-film about the 1968 protests that is ostensibly the work of Michele's rival filmmaker Gigio Cimino (Gigio Morra), but a scene of which is included in *Sweet Dreams*. The concept of a film encompassing several genres will re-emerge in Moretti's oeuvre decades later, in fully developed form, in *The Caiman*, a work where the assemblage of different film textures is particularly evident. *The Caiman* will directly thematize the challenges of making a political film, including within it different stagings of the same project.[10] Therefore, in light of its links to earlier and later works, *Palombella rossa* is (as Moretti suggests) a pivotal film in his career, but one that marks a transition, rather than a strict boundary.

The historical context

Premiered less than two months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and centring on a Communist politician who is repeatedly faced with a question he can never quite address – "What does it mean to be a Communist today?" –

[9] "When I was writing the script [for *Sweet Dreams*] I had in mind to make a parody of several film genres," Moretti says: "Lors de l'écriture du scénario [de *Sogni d'oro*], j'avais en tête de faire une parodie de divers genres cinématographiques. … Pas les films que produit Bonomo dans *Le Caïman*, pas ce cinéma dit 'de genre', mais certains films alors à la mode. Le film politique, engagé, à la Petri ou Rosi, le film de 'jeunesse' – où on aurait pu trouver une référence à mes propres films – les films d'amour…" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 60).

[10] I examine this aspect of *The Caiman* in detail in chapter 6, particularly in the section titled "Three ways of staging Berlusconi".

Palombella rossa wears its theme on its sleeve: on the face of it, telling what the film is about is not very challenging. However, for such a direct political theme, Moretti certainly has a roundabout way of tackling it, and the narrative form makes it at times immensely difficult to figure out what the characters are talking about and what is going on in the story. If one has any hopes of getting past the film's insistent catchphrases, to recover the meaning of the work as "a-text-as-indicated-in-a-context", one will need to delve deep. The director's own words, in interviews, give precious indications at points, but the way the director's statements often parallel the ones the fictional protagonist Michele Apicella (Nanni Moretti) utters in the story may constitute a hindrance, giving the false impression that the film's meaning can be neatly summarized by such statements. Instead, we must look closely at the work's internal logic. Only by doing this will we stand any chance of appreciating how the fictional protagonist of *Palombella rossa* – a character in a story – stands in relation to the actual Moretti.

In the opening sequence, Michele, a man in his mid-thirties, suffers a car accident, the shock of which leaves him amnesiac. Other people, apparently unaware of the problems Michele is facing, keep addressing him as if they knew very well who he was and what he stood for; Michele himself is not so sure. The past returns to him only in fragments, some of them shocking and unpleasant. An old friend and comrade (played by Fabio Traversa, who is actually one of Moretti's oldest friends) evokes political episodes of Michele's youth that Michele neither can nor wants to remember.[11] A journalist (Mariella Valentini) who interviews Michele assertively ascribes to him thoughts and motives Michele cannot accept. Two men (Alfonso Santagata and Claudio Morganti) follow the protagonist around, praising him for a political speech he cannot recall having made.

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[11] Traversa and Moretti were high school classmates. They first met at the age of 15, in 1968. Traversa would feature as an actor in two of Moretti's early shorts – *Paté de bourgeois* (1973) and *Come parli, frate?* (*How you speak, friar*, 1974) – as well as in his first two feature films. In the first, *I Am An Autarkist*, he is credited as both actor and assistant director, whereas in the second, *Ecce bombo*, he is just an actor. *Palombella rossa* marked their reunion after a decade, and it is their last collaboration to date. "We didn't talk for ten years, and then I was invited to take part in *Palombella rossa*. In fact, it was the producer who called me on the phone, not Moretti himself," Traversa says (in Ugo and Floris 1990: 254).

It is only little by little that Michele realizes he is both a water polo player and a prominent member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Under the historical circumstances the film was made, the allegory is transparent: by having an amnesiac hero, Moretti places questions of memory and identity front and centre. The director himself plainly stated: "The protagonist of *Palombella rossa* has amnesia because, for me, he seemed to individualize a problem of the Communist Party in Italy – a problem of memory."[12] Michele needs to know who he is and what he stands for. Some of the memories he will be confronted with are not pleasant; then again, when the Communists were forced to look back, in 1989, not everything they learned about themselves was agreeable.

Palombella rossa was shot in Acireale (Sicily) in the autumn of 1988, and it premiered in September of the following year. Its timeliness has added to Moretti's almost legendary reputation for prescience, even though it seems fair to concede that by the time the film started being shot the crisis of international communism was in plain sight already.[13] What did make it particularly biting in the Italian context was the emphasis it puts on the themes of identity and memory. Just three days after the fall of the Wall, the then leader of the PCI, Achille Ochetto, called for a discussion at all party levels about the party's very name. The momentous nature of such a decision cannot be overstated: Ochetto brought PCI's identity *as a Communist party* into question. "This problem of memory, both public and private, that I expressed through a metaphor, became a concrete reality," Moretti notes. "It was as if the Communists had a desire to cancel out their own past, both the good parts and the bad parts, in order to make themselves accepted by society so that they could govern."[14]

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[12] Porton and Ellickson 1995: 161. The interview took place in September 1994, on the occasion of Moretti's presentation of *Dear Diary* at the New York Film Festival.

[13] Some of Moretti's projects have proved to be extremely timely. After *Palombella rossa*, he was the producer and played the protagonist in Daniele Luchetti's *Il portaborse* (*The Yes Man*, 1991), an expose of corruption within the Italian political system which anticipated the "Mani Pulite" judicial process by ten months. Perhaps even more striking was the staging of the fictional story of an old Pope's abdication, in *Habemus Papam* (2011), two years prior to Pope Benedict's actual retirement. No Catholic Pope had voluntarily stepped down in almost 600 years.

[14] Porton and Ellickson 1995: 161.

The PCI had existed, without interruption, since 1921. Undercover, it had survived Italian fascism, played a central part in the resistance, and emerged from World War II as the main force of the Italian opposition, a status it would hold through the entire period of Soviet-American geopolitical rivalry (1948-89). The PCI was, indeed, the largest and most important Communist party of all Western Europe; then, between the late months of 1989 and the early ones of 1990, it found itself in the strange position of not even having a name. In the discussions of the time, rank-and-file activists, no longer knowing how to refer to it, resorted to calling it "the thing." Filming some such meetings (in Bologna, Naples, and Turin) over the late months of 1989, Moretti made a sixty-minute, fly-on-the-wall documentary, appropriately entitled *La cosa* (1990), which makes a stark contrast with the rest of Moretti's oeuvre in that the filmmaker's presence is almost entirely effaced. "*La cosa* had a very strong dramaturgical element; it was a party's suicide," the director would say a few years later.[15] The documentary is a companion piece of sorts to the fictional *Palombella rossa*, a catching-up with historical developments.[16] It would be aired on national television in March 1990, on the eve of the Communist Party's congress in Bologna which finally adopted the name change.

Meanwhile, by bringing together sports and politics, *Palombella rossa* has also an avowed autobiographical element. From 1965 to 1970, between the ages of 12 and 17, the (future) director played water polo at a highly competitive level: he reached the Italian national team in youth categories and went on to make his debut in "serie A" (the Italian first division) at age 16. Had he continued playing, he might have been in the 1976 Olympic games, and possibly again in 1980 and 1984, as he himself points out.[17] Moretti says there was no clear-cut reason why he quit, but this competitive level demanded several hours of practice per day, and by the age of 17 his interests had shifted and his friends were elsewhere. "Political commitment

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[15] "*La cosa* avait un élément dramaturgique très fort; c'était le suicide d'un parti" (Gili 2017: 76).

[16] Moretti himself considers the film to be "complementary" to *Palombella rossa* (Bonsaver 2002: 29).

[17] "Je crois que j'aurais pu participer au moins deux fois aux Jeux Olympiques" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 20).

and the athletic kind seemed impossible to reconcile at the time," he says.[18] When, in *Palombella rossa*, the protagonist's old friend confesses he didn't initially trust Michele because the latter seemed to waste his time playing sports, he is voicing a disdain for physical activity that was common in Moretti's milieu. In a sense, it is as if *Palombella rossa* enabled the filmmaker to redress the historical record, allowing his character to bring together the two pursuits the director personally had to choose between in his actual life.

Later on, at the age of 22, Moretti would resume his practice, this time at a less demanding level, in "serie D" (4th division); he would go on playing until 1986, when he retired at the age of 33. Through the making of his (quite successful) first five films, Moretti was therefore *indeed* both a filmmaker and a (nonprofessional) water polo player. He says for years he had thought about including the sport in one of his films, but he felt that something which did obtain in his actual life would not have looked like a plausible dramatic situation. "I was actually a filmmaker who played water polo, but in a fiction such an idea would seem far-fetched."[19] The observation brings to mind an Oscar Wilde epigram:

> Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration … and often ends by writing novels which are so like life that no one can possibly believe in their probability. (1905 [1891]: 9-10)

Perhaps the Italian filmmaker was not intentionally alluding to Wilde's quip; still, given Moretti's restraints to realism in art (addressed in the previous chapter), the way his little biographical anecdote parallels the Irish writer's position seems significant. When Moretti finally shot *Palombella rossa*, with a protagonist who is both an athlete and a professional politician, he had already stopped playing water polo, but most of his character's teammates in the film were the same people who had actually

[18] "Bien sûr, à l'époque l'engagement politique et l'engagement dans le sport semblaient impossibles à concilier: ceci dit personne ne vous demandait de ne pas faire de sport. De toute façon, je commençais à m'ennuyer à la piscine, j'avais d'autres centres d'intérêt et je ne m'étais lié d'amitié avec aucun de mes co-équipiers" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 20).

[19] "Dans la réalité j'étais un cinéaste qui jouais au water-polo, mais dans une fiction l'idée me paraissait invraisemblable" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 14)

played with him.[20] They represent in the fiction what they actually were in real life.

The plot of *Palombella rossa* stems from an analogy between these two different spheres: a water polo match serves as a way of speaking about the political situation, a sports team standing in for a political party. But the way Moretti approaches allegory is complicated: instead of merely replacing the political elements by their equivalents in sports, he literally brings disparate elements into the water polo match, creating numerous opportunities for incongruity. The narrative is composed of several threads, which not merely echo each other but also *intersect* at various points. In this sense, rather speaking of lines of action running in parallel, it might be more appropriate to think of a spiralling narrative structure. Here is the project in Moretti's own words:

> I wanted to tell the story of the crisis and confusion of the Communist Party, but not in a realistic film. Not in a film where the protagonist wakes up in the morning with a headache or where he's divorcing his wife, as if to say that political crises always go hand in hand with existential crises. (Porton and Ellickson 1995: 161)[21]

There is an added irony to this statement: many years later, Moretti would indeed make a film – *The Caiman* – where the protagonist undergoes both a political and an existential crisis – and even a divorce.[22] Even there, though, there is still a lag between the events in the public and the personal spheres. In Moretti films, politics and life may follow each other closely, but the fit between the two is never perfect.

[20] "La *Rari Nantes Monteverde* était composée quasi exclusivement de mes ex compagnons de jeu" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 105).

[21] This is clearly a "talking point" of Moretti's interviews about the film. He says very similar things in conversation with *Positif* (Gili 2017: 43-57) and *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Toubiana 1989b: 22-32).

[22] On the relation between the personal and the political threads of *The Caiman*, see the next chapter, particularly the section titled "The swamp".

The political analogy

The bulk of the events in *Palombella rossa* take place around the swimming pool where Michele and his team, Rari Nantes Monteverde, face Acireale, the local squad. Differently from the vast majority of Moretti's films,[23] *Palombella rossa* was shot almost entirely outside of Rome, in a small Sicilian town.[24] Moretti has explained this choice as driven by the need to create a hostile atmosphere: "For this Communist character, I wanted an away game. I wanted the spectators against *me*" (emphasis added).[25] Carlo Testa (2002: 287) notes the irony of choosing Acireale, since the Aci region has long been associated with efforts at representing the "social question" in Italian literature, ever since Giovanni Verga set his classic novel *I Malavoglia* (1881) there, the book Luchino Visconti then freely adapted to make his neorealist masterpiece *La terra trema* (1948).[26] The force of Testa's observation derives from the central place *I Malavoglia* occupies in Italian literature, as an exemplar of 19th century social realism (a movement called "verismo"), and also from the fact that Visconti's *La terra trema* was originally commissioned by the Italian Communist Party, the very same party the fictional Michele Apicella belongs to. With this in view, the fact that in *Palombella rossa* the local team of the Aci region unsentimentally thrashes a team of left-wing intellectuals from Rome (Monteverde) seems quite ironic. By pitching the Sicilian, working class team (Acireale) against the Roman, "intellectual" communists (his own tribe), Moretti would be turning Gramsci on his head: instead of a progressive alliance between the disenfranchised peasant masses from the South and the intellectuals and the trade unions from the

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[23] Other instances are part 2 of *Dear Diary* (shot in the Aeolian Islands) and *The Son's Room* (set in Ancona).

[24] The opening and closing scenes of the film are set in Rome, and so are some of the flashbacks.

[25] In the interview, recorded many years later, which accompanies the DVD, Moretti says: "Volevo per me, per questo personaggio di comunista, una partita fuori casa. Volevo il pubblico contro – contro di me" ("*Intorno al film*", 2007). In a 2001 interview with the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the director had already insisted on that idea: "Je souhaitais que ce joueur de water-polo communiste joue à l'extérieur avec le public contre lui. Ça peut paraître un détail, mais pour moi c'était capital" (Joyard and Larcher 2001: 23).

[26] "The choice of an Aci club as the allegorical enemy of the 'Communist team' seems ironic. Since the times of Verga's *I Malavoglia* and Visconti's *The Earth Trembles*, Aci had become something of an emblem for the plight of the Italian working classes, and a rallying cry for the urgency of an Italian revolution" (Testa 2002: 287).

industrialized North, the film presents the former as simply and dispassionately crushing the latter. Testa's reading is furthermore consistent with the overt allegorical nature of the sports game that takes up much of Moretti's film.

What we know about the film's production history, however, casts this interpretation into doubt. According to both Moretti's testimony and that of the film's production designer, Gianfranco Basili, a few months prior to the beginning of the shooting Moretti asked Basili to visit as many swimming pools as possible all across Italy, in order to find the right one for the film. Basili says he must have photographed some 200 swimming pools in total.[27] If Moretti had indeed made the prior decision to shoot the film in the Aci region, sending Basili on a tour of the country would have been a massive waste of time. Additionally, when they enumerate the reasons why they ended up choosing the specific location where *Palombella rossa* is set, Moretti and Basili bring up features of the physical site, not of the region where it's located or its history. Basili furthermore hypothesizes that Moretti wanted to pick some place away from Rome, because this would make it easier for him to keep the secrecy about the contents of the film.[28] There is abundant evidence to the effect that this kind of preoccupation is often at the forefront of Moretti's concerns. As per the director's own testimony, he likes it that little be known about his films prior to their release.[29]

Now, assuming Moretti did not choose Acireale for the region's literary pedigree, might Testa's observation still be relevant to our appreciation of the

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[27] "Je me souviens que Nanni m'a dit: … 'Le conseil que je te donne est de prendre ta voiture pour faire le tour des piscines de water polo.' Je suis parti de Pescara et j'ai exploré toute la côte. Puis je suis allé en Sicile et là aussi j'ai fait le tour de l'île. La majorité des lieux correspondait à des endroits où Nanni se souvenait d'avoir joué. J'ai dû visiter et prendre en photo environ deux cents piscines!" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 212).

[28] Basili: "Probabilmente [Moretti] aveva già deciso di girare laggiù in Sicilia, al riparo da occhi indiscreti, perché in fondo sentiva che *Palombella rossa* era un film molto personale" (Ugo and Floris 1990: 243).

[29] Moretti was adamant about not speaking to the press prior to the premiere of *Palombella rossa* at the Venice film festival. He gave a single published interview to his friend Giovanni Buttafava (1939-1990), for the magazine *l'Espresso*. Buttafava happened to play a minor acting role in *Palombella rossa* (as he had done already in *The Mass Is Ended*). "Pour faire travailler davantage les journalistes à Venise, je n'avais écrit ni synopsis, ni déclaration ou auto-interview, justement pour qu'ils se forcent un peu. … Quand je suis arrivé à Venise, je n'avais donné qu'une interview, à Gianni Buttafava pour *l'Espresso*. Personne sur le tournage, pas d'équipe de télé" (Toubiana 1989b: 31).

film? After all, even if Moretti did consider picking 199 other locations, he ended up choosing Acireale; when he did, could he have been guided (unconsciously, perhaps?) by the region's particular history? Or maybe he did realize the connection, but didn't want to spell it out: by articulating it, he would be giving it more symbolic weight than it should carry, perhaps. Moretti is the first to admit he sometimes makes decisions for reasons he is not entirely aware of, and also to avow he is not always the best interpreter of his own work. The fact that the film is set in a region with such a charged history is still there, even if it were just a coincidence, and no one can stop a spectator (such as Testa) from reading it as meaningful.

Should we have evidence that Moretti had chosen the Acireale swimming pool with the region's charged history in mind, I think the coincidence would carry more weight; as things stand, it seems more in the nature of an interpretable curiosity. Meanwhile, I fully admit the possibility that the history of the Aci region could have played a part in Moretti's choice, even if the director himself, for whatever reason, does not acknowledge it. That is possible.

In *Palombella rossa*, Acireale is visibly a much stronger squad than Monteverde. The contrast between the two teams is impossible to miss: "My teammates are smaller, skinnier than our opponents," the director says.[30] Valdecantos (2004: 114) reads a political intention here, suggesting the diversity amongst Monteverde's players represents the immense variety of tendencies within the Italian left, which has always posed problems to its ability to work together.[31] As previously noted, Monteverde is formed mostly by Moretti's actual teammates, with the addition of two children, who make the contrast with Acireale's athletic types all the starker. However, no actual team by the name of Rari Nantes Monteverde exists: "Rari Nantes" is a common designation for swimming and water polo teams in Italy, while

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[30] "Mes coéquipiers sont plus petits, maigrelets par rapport à l'équipe adverse" (Gili 2017: 51).

[31] "The Communist Party encompasses a multiplicity of different sensibilities, with their own ideas, their own standpoints and political positions; Michele's team, Monteverde, also includes a variety of players: taller, shorter, bigger, smaller, even kids. It is difficult to act in agreement with all these different ways of living one's ideals, however close they may be to one another" (Valdecantos 2004: 114 – my translation).

Monteverde is the neighbourhood in Rome where Moretti has lived his entire adult life – i.e., another autobiographical wink. By contrast, the opposing squad is composed of Acireale's actual players, and its coach is played by Acireale's actual coach (Mauro Maugeri), with the addition of the Hungarian Imre Budavári, a major international water polo star, who had by then already won several European Champion League titles. Even if they play fictional characters in the fictional world of film, the casting of water polo professionals performing under their actual names adds to their credibility. Before the game, Maugeri matter-of-factly declares to his players: "We are superior, both technically and tactically." When he urges them to stay focused, lest the game could become very difficult, they laugh boisterously. Triumphalism is a defining feature of Michele's opponents, something that also carries important political reverberations, as we shall see.

While Acireale's coach, wearing aviator sunglasses, looks as smug as his team, Mario (Silvio Orlando), the coach of Monteverde, in ridiculous shorts and with a dowdy bucket hat on, comes across as a man in kid's clothes. It is a calculated casting choice: "I'm somebody who conveys no athletic sense at all," Orlando says.[32] He plays a character who is both frenzied and ineffective, with a comical twist and a strong pathetic streak leaning towards the farcical. Mario is nervous, insecure, and has little authority over his own players: at one point, he starts quarrelling with Michele only because of what he imagines Michele might be thinking. Before the match, he hammers away tactical instructions to his players to the point that they get fed up and walk out, one by one, leaving him speaking to himself. Then throughout the match he yaps incessantly, in a shrill tone that makes his desperation all the more evident. When one of the players asks him about the Hungarian addition to Acireale's squad, the coach tries to sound reassuring, but it is so obvious he is lying that the player chosen to mark Budavári flatly refuses to do so. As soon as the game begins, Mario shouts incessantly to his players to "mark Budavári!", but the Hungarian

[32] "Je me demandais comment [Moretti] avait bien pu voir quelqu'un comme moi pour interpréter le coach au bord de la piscine, moi qui suis une personne qui communique zéro sens de l'athlétisme et pas plus de tendance aux hurlements" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 224).

immediately scores. With his little, incompetent lies, Mario has a kinship with the character Orlando will play in *The Caiman*, many years later.[33] At the same time, his behaviour is also fashioned after Moretti's actual coach: "Between 1975 and 1986, I had only one trainer: the nutter who features in the documentary *The Last Championship*, and who provided the inspiration for Silvio Orlando's character," Moretti says with evident affection.[34]

The water polo match between Monteverde and Acireale is the central event that provides *Palombella rossa* with a unified space and a coherent timeframe. The game follows a predictable melodramatic script: after the initial, overwhelming superiority of Acireale (who take a 9-2 lead), the underdogs make an extraordinary recovery (9-8), which culminates in a last-second, decisive penalty, taken by our hero. Reading the film in a psychoanalytical key, Mariella Cruciani sees the flagrant implausibility of this turn of events as a sure sign of the dream-like nature of the tale – a feature I will examine in more detail below.[35] For Testa, too, there is more than mere melodramatic convention to account for Monteverde's recovery: interpreting the story through a political lens, and assuming that Michele's team stands for the Communists, Testa suggests the protagonist's last-minute miss constitutes an allusion to the brief period, in the mid-1970s, when the PCI *almost* attained power at the national level. "The allegorical level of *Palombella rossa* [recounts] the long sequence of failed bids for power made by the Italian Communist party in its history" (Testa 2002: 147). Michele has three chances to take the penalty, but he hesitates when he is about to throw, and ends up delivering a half-hearted shot the goalkeeper has no difficulty in saving; even his indecision – whether to go for the left or aim

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[33] *Palombella rossa* was the first film Orlando made with Moretti. Later, he would become the first actor other than Moretti to play the leading role in a Moretti movie (in *The Caiman*). Orlando also plays a supporting role in *Aprile* (1998) and The *Son's Room* (2001), as well as in two films where Moretti plays the protagonist: *Il portaborse* (Daniele Luchetti, 1991) and *Quiet Chaos* (*Caos calmo*, Antonello Grimaldi, 2008).

[34] "J'ai joué de 1975 à 1986, toujours avec le même entraîneur: le dingue qui a inspiré le personnage de Silvio Orlando dans *Palombella Rossa* et que l'on voit dans le documentaire *L'ultimo campionato*" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 20).

[35] "La piscina è un mondo semireale e semionirico e l'intero film si pone, non sotto il segno della realtà, ma del desiderio (come spiegare altrimenti la rimonta inverosimile della squadra di Michele?)" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 14%).

to the right – may be read as a political metaphor, a nod to the Italian communists' ambivalence between sticking to an anti-capitalist stance or moderating their message to make it palatable for larger swathes of the electorate. Michele ultimately misses the shot, as – in order to fulfil his party's destiny – he was bound to: the Italian communists never managed to reach power at the national level. In Testa's eyes, the very fact that defeat in the water polo game is inflicted by a team whose star player is Hungarian is significant, an allusion to the damage wreaked on the Italian communists by the Hungarian uprising of 1956 – or rather by its violent suppression by Soviet tanks. A scene where Budavári throws the ball so hard that he breaks Monteverde's goal is interpreted by Testa as a direct, albeit metaphorical, allusion to those historical events:

> It seems clear to me that such unusual damage can only stand for the dramatic setback in public support that the Italian Communist party suffered in and after 1956, when it failed to draw the appropriate conclusions from the Soviet invasion of Imre Nagy's Hungary, and lost credibility by sharing the responsibility for it.[36] (Testa 2002: 146)

Testa's interpretation is consistent with 1) an allegorical reading of the water polo game in the film, and 2) with the role played by the 1956 events in the history of the PCI. It is, furthermore, worth noticing that the vast majority of Acireale's players in the fictional story were Acireale's *actual* players at the time of the shooting, which is *not* the case with Budavári; the Hungarian athlete played for the (also Italian) team of Nervi. The plot does not provide any specific motivation to justify the addition of this Hungarian player in Acireale's team.

Moretti's testimony on the matter is perplexing and teasing. On the one hand, he outright dismisses the idea that he would have cast Budavári because he came from an Eastern European country: "That has nothing to do with it."[37] In the same breath, however, Moretti points out that 1) Budavári

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[36] "Nagy was head of the provisional government that had declared Hungary's short-lived neutrality, i.e., her de facto independence from the Soviet bloc. After the tanks rolled in, Nagy was – in breach of an explicit promise to this effect – put on trial for treason and shot" (Testa 2002: 146).

[37] "Les pays de l'Est n'ont rien à voir dans tout ça" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 106).

was actually born in 1956, the very year of the Hungarian events, 2) his first name is Imre, like that of the then Hungarian leader, Imre Nagy, who was deposed by the Soviet coup and subsequently executed,[38] and 3) that, prior to engaging Budavári for the role, he had chosen *another* Hungarian player, and had gone so far as to make him come to Italy for an interview, although in the end he decided that that particular person was not appropriate for the part. Why he was so keen on casting a Hungarian in the film, Moretti does not say; he merely admits he wanted a foreigner to play the role, though he does not explain why.[39]

Moretti's statements were made in an interview almost two decades after the film was shot. Even if this is not explicitly brought up in the conversation, it seems clear that these observations were made against the backdrop of interpretations like Testa's, which linked Budavári's nationality to a hidden political meaning. Moretti dismisses such interpretations. When, of his own initiative, he decides to add minor coincidences which seemingly reinforce the connection between the Hungarian character and the 1956 events, I believe Moretti is in fact satirizing hypotheses like Testa's, through the rhetorical manoeuvre known as *reductio ad absurdum*. How plausible, indeed, would it be for a director to use arbitrary signifiers such as an actor's year of birth – which is never brought up in the film, and is not a significant element of said actor's biographical legend – or the coincidence between the actor's first name and that of a historical figure that is not, even remotely, alluded to in the film, to convey political meanings? Such notions only serve to demonstrate the foolishness of the interpretative method, one to which Moretti makes occasional scathing reference under the dismissive term of "Morettianism".

The one puzzling element that remains is Moretti's seemingly deliberate decision to cast a Hungarian for the part. The director offers no

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[38] "Il s'appelle Imre, comme Imre Nagy, et il est né en 1956, l'année de la révolte hongroise et de l'invasion soviétique" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 106).

[39] "En réalité, j'avais d'abord pensé à un autre joueur, qui avait un beau visage, dur. Je l'ai fait venir de Hongrie, nous l'avons rencontré, Angelo [Barbagallo] et moi, à l'aéroport de Fiumicino. Il est arrivé, nous avons parlé un peu. Mais il ne m'était pas sympathique" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 106).

reasons for this choice. But, rather than running to interpret it by a political light, it might be wiser to bear in mind that Hungary is historically the world's major power in water polo. Moretti does not say why he wanted the star player of Acireale to be a foreigner, but once he made that decision, and also the decision to cast an actual water polo athlete in the part, the choice of a Hungarian seems, if not self-evident, at least eminently plausible. Having become disappointed in the person he had initially thought of, the choice of Budavári, who actually lived and played in Italy at the time, and would therefore be able to speak the language, seems only natural; the fact that the Hungarian player happened to be called Imre and to have been born in 1956 had nothing to do with the matter.

In both this case and the one previously discussed (on the symbolic meaning attached to setting the game in the Aci region), I take authorial statements of intention to be relevant; at the same time – in keeping with the position I articulated in chapter 2, above – I also admit the possibility that the director could be lying, misremembering, or misrecognizing his own motives. A cautious attitude about an author's motives is in order – but so is a similar scepticism about the critic's associations. Whenever we are faced with interpretations like Testa's, we need to look at the available information about the film's production history (including the historical context in which the film emerged), at what is known about the filmmaker's biographical circumstances, and also at the artist's statements on the issue. None of this is to take a gullible attitude towards the filmmaker's stated intentions, but rather a guarded, critical attitude towards them. On the other hand, we also have to consider how much the hypothesis offered by the critic advances our understanding of the film as a whole. For the cases under discussion, Testa's observations do not significantly alter, or add to, the overall meaning of the film. There is abundant evidence that the water polo game in *Palombella rossa* refers allegorically to the history of the Italian Communist Party, even if the film's location were to have no particular meaning and the Hungarian player not to accrue any historical-political connotations. Additionally, Testa's reasoning rests on no more than vague associations, whereas the reasons for

disbelieving his hypotheses are substantial. On balance, the conjecture about the Aci region seems to be the less implausible of the two, and still it adds no more than a curious detail to our understanding of the film.

Finally, Testa's interpretative method seems to search for a kind of one-to-one correspondence between minor elements in the film and the external world. This, however, does not appear to be Moretti's way of working with allegory. The director himself warns us against treating his films as crossword puzzles, where each element in the fiction would univocally represent something else in the actual world.[40] As a framework for understanding the history of the PCI, the 1956 invasion of Hungary and its aftershocks are certainly a relevant back-story, but this does not mean that each step of the water polo game in *Palombella rossa* must symbolically retrace the party's history. Stefania Parigi's warning that "no sign [in this film] is univocal and rigid" seems more prudent.[41] The particular scene of Budavári's violent shot echoes an incident in *Bianca* where the protagonist (played by Moretti himself) kicks a football in such rage that he breaks the goal. Maybe trying to read this event in the story as the direct counterpart of a historical occurrence is not the most promising path towards making sense of it; indeed, many things that happen in *Palombella rossa* seem to follow a different logic.

Testa's reading of this scene fits in with his interpretation of Moretti's film as an anti-Stalinist picture, but that understanding is questionable, too. While Moretti had always been critical of pro-Soviet Communism, that does not seem to have been his primary target at this historical juncture. All of his interviews at the time underscore his concern that the PCI may have become not overly dogmatic, but rather too self-doubting. Speaking to *Positif*, he says:

> The PCI used to have a kind of sectarian pride, but these days there seems to be almost a craving for self-harm. It was sectarian, dogmatic, Stalinist, monolithic – although, in fact, it had long stopped being that way … Many

[40] In his interview with the *Cahiers* upon the release of *Mia madre*, Moretti declared: "Je ne pense pas qu'un film soit comme des mots croisés, et que chaque séquence ait une seule et unique solution, dont disposerait exclusivement le réalisateur" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 10).

[41] "Nessun segno qui è univoco e rigido" (Parigi 1998: 309).

> wanted the Communist Party to open up; but now everything is up in question in a way that it is almost dismembered.[42]

Alluding to Soviet-style communism, he adds:

> It's not a matter of my letting go of things that I have never embraced to begin with – things that had always been foreign to me, that were never part of my culture. But the party risks losing its roots, its identity, its *raison d'être*. … I am not a communist, but maybe I am more of a communist than the party's current leaders … From time to time, someone has to remind the Communist Party of its role, its duty.[43]

By the 1980s, the Italian Communists had long taken their distances from the Soviet model, and the 1956 events were not at the forefront of Moretti's concerns. Already in 1968 the PCI had broken ranks with the Soviets by openly criticizing the suppression of the Prague Spring. In fact, the adoption of this more distanced stance towards the USSR had been crucial for the PCI's domestic political ambition of eventually reaching power. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Italian communists – along with the French and the Spanish – had attempted to reconcile their Marxist identity with full insertion in the parliamentary-democratic game, an ideological shift that became known as "Eurocommunism." It is the exhaustion of this later strategy, rather than Stalinism in its earlier form, that is repeatedly evoked throughout *Palombella rossa*. This is a point I will get back to.

A "dream-like" film

There is unquestionably a political allegory at the heart of *Palombella rossa*, which I have tried to explain so far. Meanwhile, this can hardly account for the film's convoluted narrative structure. In *Palombella rossa* the water polo

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[42] "Je crois que les temps ont un peu changé. Même dans le PCI, si auparavant s'exprimait un orgueil sectaire, maintenant se manifeste un orgueil 'autolésionniste'. Avant il y avait le sectarisme, le dogmatisme, le monolithisme, le stalinisme. Comme mentalité, comme idéologie, il ne l'était plus déjà depuis longtemps. Beaucoup voulait au contraire que le parti communiste s'ouvre, aujourd'hui il s'est presque écartelé tant il remet tout en question." (Gili 2017: 49).

[43] "Outre le fait d'abandonner des choses – il ne s'agissait pas de les abandonner mais plutôt de ne jamais les embrasser – vis-à-vis desquelles je me suis toujours senti un étranger, des choses qui ne font vraiment pas partie de ma culture, le parti risque de perdre ses racines, son identité, sa raison d'être. … Je ne suis pas communiste mais … je le suis plus que les dirigeants actuels. … De temps en temps, je crois qu'il est opportun que quelqu'un rappelle au parti ce que devrait être son travail, son devoir" (2017: 49-50).

match pushes the narrative forward, providing a tight temporal sequence and a unified spatial setting around which the diegesis takes place: practically everything in the present time of the action occurs in and around the swimming pool. But, rather than establishing a neat homology between sports and politics – speaking of a sports game when *really* meaning to comment on political issues – the thrust of the film is to bring the two spheres literally together, making them collide in a single arena. The protagonist is actually – not metaphorically – both a politician and a sports player. There are parallelisms and analogies between sports and politics, but there are also salient differences, and the conflation between the two produces disconcerting results.

The film's very title is illustrative of the challenges that are raised when one tries to read it directly in political terms. In English, it has variously been translated as "Red Wood Pigeon" (on IMDb) or as "Red Lob". Both options are in some sense correct, in that the "palombella" in the title does stand for both a pigeon and a lob; meanwhile, to choose one meaning entails excluding the other, and neither of them really helps the spectator figure out what goes on in the film.

In one sense – the lob – "palombella" is a way of throwing the ball, as the director explains:

> When I played water polo, I specialized in the lob. I wasn't as strong as the others, also because I was shorter (by the time I started I wasn't yet 16). I couldn't compete with them when it came to violent shots. Therefore, I would make the movement as if purporting to shoot straight, and then I'd make a lob: the goalkeeper is expecting a straight shot and, at the exact moment his legs start giving in and he starts coming down, the ball makes an arch, describes a parabola, which in water polo is called a "palombella".[44]

Both in politics and in sports, Michele stands with the weaker side; and the analogy implies that only by acknowledging this weakness he has a chance of

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[44] Interview dated July 2nd 2007 which accompanies the DVD edition of *I Am An Autarkist* as an extra. In this interview, Moretti is not explicitly commenting on the title of his 1989 film, but rather on his efforts, at the very beginning of his filmmaking career, to make the most of the very limited means at his disposal. "The still camera, with the super 8, was my lob," he says.

competing, perhaps even of winning. Additionally, by the light of this quote it seems reasonable to read the inclusion of skinny teenagers in Monteverde's team as a sort of homage the director pays to his own younger self.

As to the other meaning of "palombella" – the pigeon – I am inclined to read Moretti's title as a nod to Raúl Ruiz's *Palomita Blanca* ("Little White Dove"), the film the Chilean director had ready to be released on the very week of Pinochet's coup, in 1973. Ruiz's film told the story of a love affair between a rich boy and a poor girl, against the background of the social and political conflicts of its time. The idea of adding a sentimental element to the political story by way of a romantic movie is important in Moretti's film, as we will see in more detail below.[45] Ostensibly on account of some erotic content, *Palomita Blanca* was banned in Chile by the country's new military authorities, and Ruiz himself had to flee to exile in France. The film would finally see the light of day almost two decades later, to great commercial success, when democracy was restored. Whether by 1989 Moretti had seen it I cannot say, but he would certainly know about its troublesome history, given that he was friends with the Chilean director, who furthermore makes a cameo appearance in *Palombella rossa*.

The polysemic quality of the title of *Palombella rossa* accords with the surrealistic guise of the narrative. Just as the distinction between different aspects of the protagonist's life breaks down, in the story, so do the boundaries between actuality, fantasy, and memory. The basic narrative line of *Palombella rossa*, focused on the water polo game, is constantly interrupted through three devices: a) flashbacks; b) a number of characters who don't quite "belong" in the narrative space (in that their presence at the game emphatically lacks any realistic motivation); c) and a film-within-the-film comprised of excerpts of David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), which time and again takes over the entire screen. The way these interruptions speak to the main narrative thread of *Palombella rossa* is far from straightforward. Events depicted in the flashbacks do not immediately fill in information to

[45] See the section titled "The sentimental element".

establish a direct, causal relationship with what happens in the present, as they might do in a more "classical" narrative; instead, they quickly suspend the narrative flow to insinuate hypothetical parallelisms, like memories flashing before Michele's eyes. Sometimes these echo what is happening in the present, other times they ironically contradict what is being said, and at other times still they directly interfere in Michele's ability to respond to what is taking place around him, as if the contents of the memory "leaked" onto the present.[46] The intrusions give the story a stream of consciousness aspect, a feature that is consistent with the "psychological realism" art cinema narration strives for: it is as if the juxtaposition in *Palombella rossa* of images from different sources replicated the confusion going on in the protagonist's mind.[47] Michele struggles to recompose his identity from disjointed fragments. In an interview, the director himself articulates this point: "Everything comes back to the protagonist through the flashbacks … Therefore, I proceed in a fragmented, composite manner."[48]

Over time, the flashbacks comprise three minor narrative threads, which refer to Michele's childhood, his early adult years, and a recent TV debate. Each of them has a plot line of sorts, with defined characters and appropriate settings, so that we never hesitate about their status *as flashbacks*. Meanwhile, the water polo game creates a basic, continuous framework that makes the successive interruptions digestible, from a narrative standpoint.[49] Some critics have proposed a psychoanalytic lens to read this convoluted narrative, suggesting that from the beginning of the film – from the very opening scene, where Michele engages two little children in a

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[46] Something similar happens in *Mia madre*, as I have pointed out in chapter 4, in the context of a discussion of the central features of art cinema as a mode of narration. See the section titled: "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody".

[47] "Art-film narration is more subjective more often than is classical narration. For this reason, the art film has been a principal source of experiments in representing psychological activity in the fiction film" (Bordwell 1985: 209).

[48] "Tout arrive au protagoniste par les flash-back, ceux de son enfance trente ans auparavant, ceux réels d'un petit film en super 8 tourné seize ans plus tôt, ceux de quatre jours avant, 'mardi dernier', etc. Ainsi, je procède de manière délibérément composite et fragmentaire" (Gili 2017: 56-57).

[49] As David Bordwell points out in reference to Alain Resnais' *The War Is Over* (*La Guerre est Finie*, 1966), "it is reassuring, at the formal level, to discover that, however puzzling the excursions become, we will return to an 'objective' frame of reference" (1985: 219).

silly contest and, as a consequence, smashes his car – the protagonist is in a regressive psychological state.

According to psychoanalytical theory, a crucial developmental occurs in babies when they realize that the entity that attends to their basic needs – typically, the mother – is not one with themselves: that it is separate and that she can go away. Incidentally, this process is alluded to in Moretti's later *Aprile*, in a scene where the protagonist (played by Moretti himself, under his own name) feigns shock at the revelation that his mother (played by Moretti's actual mother) was not granted parental leave when he was a baby, and that therefore, in his earliest months of existence, he was sometimes left crying until she could return home to breastfeed him. In psychoanalytical terms, melancholy feelings in adult life often carry the belated echo of this early separation, but this process also allows the baby to perceive itself, for the first time, as separate from the external world, and thus to begin its process of individuation – to become autonomous, to grow up.[50] Just as he reads neurotic suffering in terms of early trauma, Freud interprets the "oceanic feeling" – an experience of oneness with the world that many read in religious terms – as a belated echo of the intimate, primordial link between the infant and the mother. In his later writings, namely *Civilization and its Discontents*, the Viennese doctor described the human being as torn between a wish to go back to an original fantasy omnipotence, when there was no distinction between the individual and the world, and the acceptance of the reality principle, of which the baby has an early inkling when she realizes she cannot feed herself, and is therefore at the mercy of forces beyond her grasp.

By these lights, the fact that the action of *Palombella rossa* is set in a swimming pool may attest to something more essential than merely the director's biographical experience: the large water container would be the symbolic equivalent of the mother's womb, and Michele's plunge into it a visual representation of his regressive wishes. Not by chance, when the

[50] Moretti rehearses these themes in *Aprile* on the occasion of the birth of his own son. In a scene I will comment on again in the conclusion to the next chapter, the film's protagonist explicitly voices his reluctance to grow up: "But why become an adult? There's no point!"

protagonist dives into the pool for the first time, he enters – as I describe below – a fantastic world that features elements that clearly belong in his childhood. A number of otherwise mystifying scenes in *Palombella rossa* can similarly be illuminated by a psychoanalytical light.

In *Palombella rossa*, Michele visibly struggles with difficulties in letting go of old wishes and sorrows, and moving on. As the film draws to a close, after the water polo game is over, he desperately cries for his mother: "The snack cakes of when I was little are never coming back! The May afternoons, the bread and chocolate snacks, are never coming back! Mama! My mama! My mama is never coming back! The chicken soup when I was ill… The last days of school before the summer break!" He makes similarly anguished calls for his mother as he drives his car – and crashes it – onto a cliff, in the film's final sequence. At one point, talking to a journalist about political matters, Michele out of the blue declares he has "*no* wish to return to his mother's womb". Through the rhetorical mechanism Freud described as "negation" – a process by which an individual effectively affirms what she is ostensibly denying – Michele provides indirect confirmation of the psychoanalytical hypothesis.[51]

If Michele's psychological state is one of going back to a situation where there was no distinction between himself and the world, then none of the other characters in *Palombella rossa* exist as autonomous agents. Cruciani reads them as mere "phantasmatic presences" in Michele's mental world, coming in and out of the frame as Michele conjures them – alongside dreams, memories, and fragments of a film he has seen a long time ago.[52] The swimming pool is similarly not a physical entity, and whatever happens there is not limited by plausibility or even by the laws of nature – as we realize when day suddenly, inexplicably, turns into night.

[51] According to Freud, negation allows people to express thoughts they would otherwise feel compelled to suppress, and which they can only admit by way of a disavowal: "The content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is *negated*. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed ... With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning" (1925: 367-368 – emphasis in the original).

[52] "Il film è popolato esclusivamente di presenze fantomatiche" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 12%).

> The rules of logic have no bearing on the unconscious, which is, one might say, the realm of the illogical, where tendencies with opposite goals can coexist side-by-side, with no need for harmonizing them. The film thus confirms – and exacerbates – the surreal component that had always been present in Moretti's films, to the point that one can only make sense of it through the kind of interpretative work one does on dreams.[53]

In the unconscious, magical events can take place – such as the audience of the water polo match speaking to Michele in one voice, or the swimming pool being taken over by ads for sweets from three decades prior. The several layers of the protagonist's consciousness – present-day awareness, memories, dreams – coexist side-by-side. "Everything that takes place elsewhere also takes place, at the same time, here, in the swimming pool, manifesting itself on the same plane, with no variation in depth," Stefania Parigi writes (1998: 311).[54] People who were in Rome may pop up unexpectedly by the side of the pool, even if the game takes place in Sicily, hundreds of miles away; and, for the same reason, the protagonist often responds in the present to events that took place decades ago.[55]

Clodagh Brook (2007) investigates the dream-like nature of *Palombella rossa* by looking at it in terms of the three markers of the oneiric – incongruity, uncertainty, and discontinuity – proposed by the American psychiatrist John Allan Hobson. Incongruity in *Palombella rossa* results from non-conformity between characters and the circumstances in which we find them: for instance, it is often hard to make sense of what two excited militants say and do, as they chase Michele around the swimming pool. As the day proceeds, the bundle of characters gathering there only grows stranger. We will find a Catholic activist by the name of Simone (Mario Patanè), apparently keen on converting Michele, and then a sort of mock

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[53] "Le regole della logica non hanno alcun valore nell'inconscio che è, si può dire, il regno dell'illogico: in esso tendenze con mete contrastanti coesistono le une accanto alle altre, senza che si avverta l'esigenza di armonizzarle. Il film conferma ed esaspera, dunque, la componente surreale, da sempre presente nel cinema di Moretti, al punto di poter essere interpretato solo attroverso il lavoro che si compie con i sogni" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 13%).

[54] "Tutto ciò che è altrove `s simultaneamente lì, nella piscina, e viene accostato sullo stesso piano, senza variazioni di profondità" (Parigi 1998: 311).

[55] "Non ci sono, in *Palombella rossa*, due ordini contrastanti di realtà: quella vissuta, qui e ora, e quella ricordata, lì e allora. Vige, invece, il principio della simultaneità e dell'intreccio" (Parigi 1998: 312).

theologian (Raúl Ruiz) who shows up by the side of the pool to deliver the oddest lines, which the Chilean director wrote himself.[56] A Fascist from Michele's high school days (Antonio Petrocelli) will also be there, as well as the protagonist's teenage daughter, Valentina (Asia Argento), in addition to Maugeri's yoga instructor, the referee's psychoanalyst (played by the Slavic literature scholar Giovanni Buttafava), and others. Any narrative justification for these people's presence is conspicuously absent: "It is as if you had called us all here today," Traversa offers at one point, without the slightest pretence of plausibility.[57] Asked, in an interview, about the inclusion of Michele's daughter in the story – she spends most of her time doing school assignments unconnected to the incidents taking place around her – Moretti explicitly says that characters and events occur in the film whenever they crop up in the protagonist's consciousness. "The spectator discovers fragments of Michele's life as they come to his mind – at the same time."[58]

In Brook's terms, discontinuity refers to "abnormal shifts" (2007: 117), such as when the water polo game, which had been taking place in daytime suddenly, without any clear motivation, is set at night. The transition may seem random, but it was intended by Moretti, as attested by the significant practical challenges it created for the film shoot.[59] As the game advances, events tend to disregard plausibility more and more. It is therefore the present time of the film – even more so than memories or dreams – that is "internally marked as a product of the unconscious," to borrow Brook's phrase (2007: 117). Present day events invite a metaphorical reading, whereas flashbacks generally seem to invite realistic interpretation.

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[56] Casting the Chilean filmmaker in the role of the theologian is most likely a nod to Ruiz's 1978 film *The Suspended Vocation* (*La vocation suspendue*), which recounts the story of a Dominican monk's theological disputes with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Ruiz's film is itself a thinly veiled allegory about the ideological squabbles of the Left.

[57] For convenience's sake, I sometimes refer to the character of the old friend by the name of the actor who plays him, even though the character is actually never called by name in *Palombella rossa*.

[58] "*Q: Pourquoi faire entrer le personnage de votre fille dans cette histoire de piscine?* A: … Ça me faisait plaisir que le spectateur découvre des fragments de vie qui entrent et sortent de la tête et de la mémoire de Michele en même temps que lui" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 118).

[59] This was the beginning of autumn and nights were getting cold; the pool itself wasn't heated. Lighting was a challenge, and so was keeping 300 extras on the stands till 5 a.m. In addition, bats would constantly be flying into the pool at night. Moretti discusses these challenges in his interviews with Gili (2017: 53) and with Chatrian and Renzi (2008: 113).

If we take the present time of the film to be something akin to a dream, then maybe the initial and final car crashes, which bookend the story, could be taken as external boundary markers, signalling the moments when Michele transitions into and out of the dream. This hypothesis works most easily with the opening car crash, since it provides the overt narrative justification for Michele's bout of amnesia: in the film's first scene, he is driving, but gets so absorbed grimacing at two small children who ride the back seat of the car ahead of him that he smashes his own car onto a parked vehicle. The episode looks definitely silly, almost implausible – Serge Toubiana calls it a "gag-accident" (1989: 20) – but it is not conspicuously unrealistic.[60]

In the closing sequence of *Palombella rossa*, Michele will again be driving his car, his daughter sleeping in the passenger seat next to him. Without her noticing, he works himself up to an emotional frenzy and throws the car off the road, downhill, in a quasi-suicidal manner. The ending echoes the beginning, bringing things full circle, both car crashes marked off from the rest of the story for being set in Rome. But whereas the first one is depicted in a realistic fashion, the final one is patently not, particularly from the moment of the accident itself. Michele and Valentina emerge practically unscathed from the wreckage, and then join other characters – including characters belonging to incompatible timeframes, such as Michele himself as a child (Gabriele Ceracchini) and Michele's mother at that time (Luisanna Pandolfi) – in adoration of a cardboard sun. The reunion brings to mind the ending of Fellini's 1963 film *8½*, where people from the present-time of the story come together with characters that belong to the protagonist's dreams and memories. This idea of coexistence of different temporal planes draws on Freud's analogy between the individual's psyche and a very old city, like Rome: if the psychoanalyst were an archaeologist, the Viennese doctor

[60] A scene in the later *The Caiman* echoes this one: the fictional film producer Bruno Bonomo (Silvio Orlando) is on the wheel when Teresa (Jasmine Trinca) explains that the film project she submitted to him, and which they are now trying to bring to life, is a portrait of the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Bonomo hadn't paid enough attention to the script, and the news comes as such a shock that he smashes his car against the one ahead of him.

suggests, he would be able to detect the various layers of history superimposed in a single place. Freud writes:

> Now, let us make the fantastical assumption that Rome is not a place where people live, but a psychical entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent … The temple of Jupiter Capitolinus would once more stand on the site of the Palazzo Caffarelli, without there being any need to dismantle the latter structure, and indeed the temple would be seen not only in its later form, which it assumed during the imperial age, but also in its earliest, when it still had Etruscan elements and was decorated with terracotta antefixes. (1962 [1930]: 17)

A few lines below, Freud adds: "if we wish to represent a historical sequence in spatial terms, we can do so only by juxtaposition in space." *Palombella rossa*'s closing scene does just that, bringing together characters from different timeframes in contemplation of a rising sun. "It is the sun of the future, now in papier-mâché," Moretti describes in an interview.[61] The image picks up a metaphor that had already been present in *Ecce bombo*. *Palombella rossa* then concludes on a freeze frame of Michele as a kid, unable to repress his laughter in the face of such an obvious fake. The small Michele laughing at the scene brings to mind the proverbial child of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes," easily seeing through an imposture.

Parigi (1998: 309-310) suggests that, if we assume Michele has succumbed to the final car crash, the entire film could be construed, retrospectively, to be the proverbial life flashing before a man's eyes at the moment of his death.[62] It is a thought-provoking hypothesis, but the work is designed in such a way as to make it impossible for anyone to answer it in a

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[61] The interviewers ask Moretti whether the scene is meant to refer back to the sunrise at Ostia in *Ecce bombo*, but the director rebuffs the suggestion, and instead cites Nikita Mikhalkov's *An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano*, which the Russian director staged first as a film (in 1977) and then as a theatre play (ten years later, with Marcello Mastroianni as the protagonist). "*Q: La scène finale est-elle une référence à l'aube dans* Ecce bombo*?* A: Non, c'est le soleil de l'avenir désormais en papier mâché. Et puis c'est aussi la parodie d'une scène tirée d'un spectacle de Mikhalkov avec Mastroianni, *Partition inachevée pour piano mécanique*" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 118).

[62] "Si potrebbe addirittura pensare che l'intero film sia tutto negli occhi semichiusi di un morente che si fa attraversare dalle immagini della propria vita, nell'ultima manciata di secondi che gli restano" (Parigi 1998: 309-310).

definite manner. Again this kind of indeterminacy is a feature of the art film as a genre: "A banal remark of the 1960s, that such films make you leave the theatre thinking, is not far from the mark: the ambiguity, the play of thematic interpretation, must not be halted at the film's close" (Bordwell 2008: 156).

A political film yearning to be a musical

To make sense of the narrative logic of the flashbacks in *Palombella rossa* we need to carefully examine each one of its instances. The first occurs very early on, and it is introduced as a dream. In the present time of the action, Michele travels with his team to the game, and yet he can't so much as recall what sport it is they are supposed to play. He falls asleep on the train, as the coach is (as ever) giving tactical instructions. The scene cuts to his younger self, aged 9 or 10, eating a pastry and telling his mother he has thought things over, he's reconsidered, and does not want to play water polo after all. This – the memory of *not* wanting to play water polo – is what gives present-day Michele the first hint of what sport he plays now. Ambivalence is immediately suggested.

There is a related irony in the way a little later (in *fabula* time) Michele finds out he is a communist. In the present time of the narrative, Michele sits in the dressing room, before the game, listening to the coach's instructions. At one point he gets distracted, his mind wanders, and on the soundtrack we start hearing his voice reading some totally unrelated text. Cut to a shot of Michele sitting on what seems to be a hotel bed, all by himself, reading aloud from a piece of paper, as if trying to figure out its meaning. His puzzlement is matched by ours: the disjunction between sound and image at the beginning of the scene, the fact that the words we hear have no connection to what we see, makes it all seem incongruous. Once Michele finishes reading from the paper, he concludes it is an article about someone who has died: the passing of this man, the text says, calls for a reflection about an entire generation. Reading this eulogy, it suddenly dawns on

Michele that he himself is the author of the text – and, therefore, that he himself is a communist. If we were to accept Parigi's suggestion to see *Palombella rossa* as an extended flashback on the protagonist's life at the moment of his death, we could even imagine that the "dead comrade" alluded to in this scene might be the protagonist himself: *Palombella rossa* would then be the story of a communist told at the moment of his death – which furthermore coincided with the demise of communism itself (at least such was the prevalent understanding at the time). As soon as he realizes he is a communist, Michele tries to retrieve his political ideas; however, he manages to go no further than a few scattered words. "Our project to transform society…", he starts. "How did that go? What was that speech?" Snippets of old phrases come back to him, but only as disjointed fragments. Even when he manages to recover some complete sentence, the words feel stale, as if they had become strictly self-referential, dead in their capacity to evoke reality.

When Michele's vocabulary crumbles, what can he rely on? Other people's talk, he finds, is no more dependable than his own. As soon as he arrives at the swimming pool, he is greeted by two strange militants who exuberantly compliment him for his speech last Tuesday – except Michele has no idea what they are referring to. "All around him there is nothing but words, a verbal deluge," Moretti comments.[63] The two activists like Michele for something he said but cannot remember; on the other hand, every time he attempts to say something of his own accord, they do not let him finish. Apparently, these two ostensible fans know more about Michele than he himself does: they know he likes cake – a recurrent trait in Michele Apicella's earlier incarnations in film – so they force a large cake upon him. "It's as if they demanded that my character remains the same, while I, Moretti-Michele, am trying to make a different film," the director explains.[64] But when Michele fails to eat the cake they've brought to him (or say the words

[63] "C'est la souffrance d'un personnage qui est seul. Autour de lui, il n'y a que des mots, des flots de parole…" (Toubiana 1989b: 27).

[64] "Que ce soient les souvenirs, les gâteaux qu'ils m'apportent, c'est comme s'ils avaient vu mes autres films… Comme s'ils voulaient que mon personnage soit toujours celui des autres films… Et moi, Moretti-Michele, je cherche à faire un autre film" (Toubiana 1989b: 26).

they expect him to say) the enthusiasm of the two activists quickly turns into a rage. They are constantly indignant, erupting into vehement outbursts which seem to mean nothing to Michele – or, indeed, to the spectators.

At the time of *Palombella rossa*'s release, Moretti repeatedly compares the fictional protagonist's struggle in the story to his own efforts as a director. If we follow his indications in interviews, then *Palombella rossa* rest not just on an analogy between the two planes of its fictional protagonist's life, but it comprises a third: "This isn't just a film about the PCI and water polo, it is also a film about the cinema: I am a communist, a water polo player, and also a filmmaker who is trying to make a film."[65] Michele is a politician who does not want to say the things others expect him to say, Moretti suggests, just like he himself does not want to make the kinds of films others expect him to make.

As he consistently does in his interviews, for rhetorical purposes Moretti conflates his fictional character with himself, blending together what happens in the film with what the film is trying to do (as a film); but a degree of caution is in order here. Nothing in the film itself intimates the idea that Michele might "actually" (i.e., in the story) be a filmmaker. In a recent interview, Moretti even admits that such a reading only occurred to him in hindsight, and it wasn't his idea to begin with:

> There was perhaps another reason why I chose an amnesiac protagonist, but that is something I only realized once the film was done: maybe I, as a filmmaker and an actor, did not want to play the same character again, and as a screenwriter was tired of writing the same stories ... Maybe Michele cannot remember because I, as a screenwriter, filmmaker, and actor, wanted to get rid of him. And I'll add something that is perhaps too clever for me – maybe it was a French journalist who suggested it at the time: those characters who in *Palombella rossa* come and address Michele are like the

[65] "Ce n'est pas seulement un film sur le PCI et sur le water-polo, c'est aussi un film sur le cinéma: je suis un communiste, un joueur de water-polo, mais aussi un metteur en scène qui cherche à faire un film" (Toubiana 1989b: 25).

> spectators of my previous films who remember things about me and about my life, and hence force me to always play the same character.[66]

Immediately after his first encounter with the odd pair of militants, Michele walks to the dressing room, presumably to drop the cake he's just been handed. On his way, he is intercepted by an older man (Luigi Moretti), who harasses him with a political rant peppered with Marxist expressions: "The alternative is a movement of struggle," the man yells. "The strength of the opposition lies in the struggle!" Once more, political discourse is delivered in a state of great agitation. "There is a vast conflictive potentiality in society which calls for direction," the man insists. "If it isn't directed, it will turn to chaos, or just peter out." It is unclear what exactly he is talking about, or what Michele is supposed to do about this diatribe; Michele looks startled. He decides to plunge into the swimming pool and, as he does this, the older man's dispiriting growling is replaced, on the soundtrack, by soothing nondiegetic music. By jumping into the water, he – almost as if by magic – cancels the man's speech.[67]

If the events in the swimming pool to a certain extent mirror the world of politics, the water also seems to function as a separate realm, which provides Michele with a refuge from its oppressive, pervasive intrusion. Michele swims having the pool entirely for himself, whilst floating ads for ice cream and sweets pass by him. The ads have a distinctly old-fashioned, "crafty," handmade look, as if they were publicity from the 1950s or 1960s –

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[66] "C'è forse un altro motivo per cui ho scelto proprio un'amnesia per raccontarlo: mi è venuto in mente a film finito. Forse io come regista e come attore non volevo rifare sempre lo stesso personaggio, e come sceneggiatore ero stanco di scrivere sempre storie in cui da una parte c'era il mio protagonista, e dall'altra gli amici un po' superficiali e cialtroni con cui litigare. Forse Michele non si ricorda più chi è perché io come sceneggiatore attore e regista volevo lasciarmelo alle spalle. E aggiungo una cosa forse troppo intelligente per me, magari me l'avrà detta un giornalista francese ventisette anni fa: i personaggi che nel film entrano in relazione con Michele è come fossero gli spettatori dei miei film che, ricordandomi dei pezzi di me stesso e della mia vita, mi obbligano a reinterpretare sempre lo stesso personaggio" (Finos and Morreale 2016).

[67] Don Giulio achieves a similar effect in *The Mass is Ended*, when he turns up the volume of his radio, cancelling with the help of a song the sound of his sister's voice as she reads out loud a letter their father wrote to his (that is, the father's) lover: "Di fronte al sindacalista che continua a parlare instancabilmente, lo smemorato Apicella reagisce tuffandosi in acqua così come Michele-Don Giulio, in *La messa è finita*, alza il volume della radio per non ascoltare le frasi scritte dal padre all'amante" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 9%).

the years of Michele's childhood.[68] In an interview, the director admits he asked his production designer to model those ads after a retro look, although he refrains from spelling out the full thematic implications of this choice.[69] He frames it in terms of a personal preference: "I didn't want to celebrate the aesthetics of 1980s commercials, so I chose a kind of graphic design, of colours, that I actually like, which I wanted to be in my film."[70] In fact, the entire premises of the Acireale pool were rebuilt for the film shoot – "as a film set in open air," Moretti says – to try to give them "a 1950s feel." "Only the water stayed the same."[71]

As Michele gently swims amidst the ads, a group of players passes in front of him, in a kind of synchronised dance. The entire scene looks very harmonious, with more than a whiff of the fantastic: a long shot depicts Michele surrounded by the ads, with the other players swimming by in their little coordinated moves; then another group jumps in, also in synchronized fashion, and the music acquires a happier, animated quality. It's a kind of ballet. The choreography brings to mind the idea for the musical that Moretti will dramatize years later, in *Aprile*, where the protagonist (Moretti playing himself) is ostensibly torn between making a documentary on Italy's current political situation and the desire to shoot a musical about a Trotskyite pastry cook set – again – in 1950s Italy. As Chatrian and Renzi point out, in Moretti's oeuvre, the idea of a politically-themed musical harks back even further, to *Sweet Dreams*.[72] Within the diegesis of that earlier film, it wasn't Michele, but rather his foe, Gigio Cimino (Gigio Morra), who was shooting a

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[68] In a monologue towards the end of the film, Michele mentions he is 35, and this exactly matches Moretti's age at the time of the shooting.

[69] "J'avais demandé au scénographe de se caler sur le goût qui dominait quelques décennies plus tôt, pour l'aspect artisanal du dessin [des publicités], et pour les couleurs" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 30).

[70] "Comme je ne veux pas célébrer l'esthétique publicitaire des années quatre-vingt, je fais le choix de graphismes et de couleurs qui me plaisent, dont je veux dans mon film" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 30).

[71] "Les couleurs, la structure [de la piscine]: j'ai voulu lui donner un style années 50, avec ces murs peints qui datent un peu. Il n'y a que l'eau qui est restée… d'avant. Nous avons tout refait, le bar, comme un studio à ciel ouvert" (Toubiana 1989b: 25-26).

[72] While Moretti does not directly address the interviewers' question, he seems to imply assent. "Unfortunately, I think I'll never shoot a musical comedy," he simply says. "***Q**: La comédie musicale sur 68 est ensuite devenue la comédie musicale sur la pâtissier trotskiste, dont vous parler pour la première fois dans* Journal intime*, et que vous cherchez à tourner dans* Aprile. A: Malheureusement, je crois que je ne tournerai jamais de comédie musicale…" (2008: 64).

musical about the 1968 movement, featuring dancing girls in Red Guard outfits who carried Chairman Mao's Little Red Book in their hands.[73] While such a scene ostensibly belonged only in Cimino's film, and the concept was the object of Michele's scorn, in fact it was of course also part of Moretti's picture: "You poke fun at the idea of a musical about '68, but in the meantime, you take pleasure in including it in your film," Chatrian and Renzi observe. The director admits: "I enjoyed shooting that. I love the choreography in that sequence."[74]

In *Aprile*, the protagonist goes endlessly back and forth between his two ideas for a film, seemingly unable to concentrate or finish either project. On the surface, Moretti's "serious" documentary and the escapist idea for a musical clash; in fact, the two combine, allowing Moretti to make a political film in the idiosyncratic guise of a work in progress. The final sequence of *Aprile* depicts the first day of shooting of the musical. In its colour palette, its gratuitousness, its spontaneity, its joy, the scene brings to mind the swimming ballet of *Palombella rossa*. Parigi concurs (1998: 314-315):

> In *Palombella rossa* this yearning for a musical surfaces particularly in the scene of the swimming pool filled with ads for sweets: wrapped in an atmosphere of suspension created by the musical score (the film's leitmotiv), the characters intimate the stylised movements of a ballet. The image is explicitly playful and joyous, even if through a melancholy veiling.[75]

The period in which the closing episode of *Aprile* is ostensibly situated is the same of *Palombella rossa*'s ads. Referring to the later film, Moretti again speaks of the particular care with which every element was designed.

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[73] As I point out in chapter 6, the Maoist dancers of *Sweet Dreams* and the Trotskyite pastry cook of *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* are embodiments of a recurring contrast, in Moretti's work, between the negative pole of Maoism and the positive one of Trotskyism. See the section titled "Who is Moretti now?"

[74] "*Q: Vous riez de l'idée d'une comédie musicale sur 68, mais en même temps vous la tournez, puis vous vous amusez à l'insérer dans le film.* A: Ça m'a fait plaisir de tourner ça. J'aime la chorégraphie de cette séquence" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 64).

[75] "In *Palombella rossa* questa voglia emerge soprattutto nella scena della piscina riempita dai cartelloni pubblicitari di dolciumi dove, avvolti in una musica di sospensione, che è il leitmotiv dell'opera, personaggi accennano movimenti stilizzati di balletto. È un'immagine esplicitamente ludica e gioiosa, pur nella sua velatura malinconica" (Parigi 1998: 314-315).

"The cakes … were modelled after photos of 1950s pastries," he says.[76] The scenes in *Palombella rossa* and *Aprile* are twins, and not just on the surface: the function they perform in each film is essentially the same, allowing Moretti to open up a space for recreation and creativity within an otherwise stifling political world.

The way you speak

Who are the older man and the two indignant activists who come across Michele's path? Reading the film through a psychoanalytical lens, Cruciani sees them as representing the "resistances" which tend to crop up in any therapeutic process.[77] For Testa (2002: 145), who prefers the political approach, they stand for a conservative response in the face of the crisis of communism, one that is to be contrasted with Michele's more liberal reaction. The older man's rant would manifest a defensive reversal into a doctrinaire position, while the two militants epitomize the descent into moralistic self-righteousness. In Testa's view, it would be easy for Michele to "slip into" such "patterns of thought": they are "temptations" he manages to avoid, and which demonstrate (bad) ways in which the communists responded to the ideological crisis.[78]

We should, nonetheless, be cautious not to put an overly positive gloss on Michele's agnostic stance: his position is a difficult, even anguished one. While he rejects the clichés offered to him, he is unable to articulate what he stands for with any kind of clarity. As a consequence, he suffers from a sort of

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[76] "Les gâteaux étaient particulièrement soignés. Ils étaient fabriqués d'après des photos de pâtisseries des années 50" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 64).

[77] "Non vano dimenticati i due che tentano di blandire Michele con i dolciumi e che, delusi da lui, lo rimproverano in continuazione: esse incarnano le resistenze che si manifestano nel corso di un'analisi e che si oppongono ad ogni cambiamento" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 12%).

[78] Testa's analysis is driven by an analogy between the character of Michele and that of the Catholic Saint Anthony (2nd-3rd centuries AD), in particular in the way the latter is depicted in Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptations of Saint Anthony* (1874). "In … reiterating … his choice of mental independence, Michele duplicates in modern times the (self-flagellating) stubbornness of the hermits of early Christianity" (Testa 2002: 145). In Testa's view, Michele's aversion to cliché – which I will address below – reinforces the Flaubertian resonances of his character, considering the attention the French novelist dedicated to the theme, namely in his posthumously published works *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881) and *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (1911-13). As usual, the associations Testa proposes are not outright implausible, but they are oblique.

aphasia, interrupted by occasional outbursts of anger. Furthermore, the contradictions, pains and ambiguities of individual subjectivity when faced with public responsibility are a recurrent topic in Moretti's cinema. In my view, his films do not endorse a retreat from the public sphere, but work through a tension that is never resolved.

We Have A Pope (2011) is a case in point. At the end of this later film, the newly elected Pope abdicates, retiring from the scene after having delivered a difficult speech. Melville (Michel Piccoli) has vindicated his own individual liberty, and as he exits he seems relatively content, or at least at peace with his own choice. However, the final shots of the film focus not on him, but on the cardinals' horrified expressions, and on the general despondency of the crowds gathered on Saint Peter's Square. The final sentences of Melville's speech are accompanied, non-diegetically, by Arvo Pärt's "Miserere" (Latin for "Have mercy"), and in particular its rendition of "Dies Irae", a 13th century hymn about the Day of Judgment, describing the wrath of God.[79] In a medium-close shot, a cardinal hides his face in his hands in slow-motion, in an image that is reminiscent of Edvard Munch's famous painting "The Scream" (1893), while the music strikes a very high pitch. The cardinals cast their eyes down, the flags on the square come to a still, and the final credits are introduced with an abrupt cut to black. It is in this atmosphere of perplexity and anguish that the story reaches its end. The music's high pitch furthermore prolongs itself well into the credits; to say this gives the finale an apocalyptic tone is literally true, given the overt theme of Pärt's piece. These final scenes suggest that *We Have A Pope* is not just a liberal apology for human fallibility, but rather contains an anguished call for commitment and leadership. The ending seems to leave the spectator not with a feeling of reassurance, but rather with a problem that needs to be confronted.

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[79] Moretti himself points out the fact that he would use again a piece by Pärt for the opening credits of his next film, *Mia madre*, thereby creating an element of continuity between the two works: "Dans le générique d'ouverture de *Mia madre*, j'utilise aussi une musique d'Arvo Pärt. Cela crée un lien entre la fin du film précédent et le début du suivant" (Gili 2017: 137).

In *Palombella rossa*, although the trade-unionist's tirades are tiresome and hollow, the fact that he is older than Michele – and played by Moretti's actual father, besides – seems to confer a certain authority on him.[80] The communists used to possess a vocabulary to articulate their worldview – even if, by this point, such vocabulary has exhausted its capacity to express something meaningful. In a sense, his dogmatic rhetoric reinforces rather than diminishes the character's seniority.

Michele's struggle to escape other people's definitions of himself – a theme we have alluded to in connection with the two excited militants – is illustrated most clearly in his interactions with journalists, particularly with the woman who follows him around the pool. She and him do not speak the same language – in fact he does not want to speak her language. Michele struggles to avoid being pigeonholed into her shallow categories, and strives to find the words that would break her inadvertent ideological armour. Her introduction to the interview is baroque:

> Picking such an antiquated and dusty place to meet – a place that resembles you, in a way – it is as if you wanted to make a statement before tomorrow's election, and after what happened last Tuesday.

Michele has a look of incomprehension on his face, as if her phrases left him midway between befuddled and repelled. "Michele is like a person in the process of rediscovering the world – the world of chitchat, of political, journalistic, and sports chatter," Moretti says. "He does not understand everything."[81] Things that would presumably not have struck him as odd in the past – he is, after all, a professional politician and a sports player – now seem utterly mystifying. For the rhetorical effect the film aims to achieve, it is also important that such talk sound odd to the spectators: when people address Michele, the character's bafflement mirrors our own.

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[80] Luigi Moretti plays fatherly figures in relation to Michele Apicella in other films as well: in *Sweet Dreams* he is the producer of Michele's film, whereas in *Bianca* (1984) he is the resident shrink at the school where Michele teaches – not to look after the students, but after the faculty.

[81] "C'est comme quelqu'un qui redécouvre le monde: la société de la parole, du bavardage politique, sportif, journalistique. Il ne comprend pas tout" (Toubiana 1989b: 32).

The journalist's questions carry a heavy load of preconceptions. When she asks him about some recent events and he says he cannot recall them, she takes this as a joke and assumes he is being disingenuous: "for someone who deplores that politics be treated like show business ["*la politica spectacolo*"]," she says, "you're quite the showman yourself." The observation displeases Michele: "if that's the way you speak, I can only wonder how you write," he retorts. His remark echoes the one his daughter had made when talking to the same journalist earlier on: when the latter wanted to know whether Valentina and her father ever discussed politics, the girl had told her they usually talked about more mundane topics, such as the way she should dress, particularly about the colour of her shoes. "He thought I should buy the white or dark blue ones, whereas I preferred them pink with high heels. So we got these," she says – pointing to her greenish blue trainers, which look nothing like the other two options. "Delightful!", the journalist exclaims, a word-choice that immediately irritates Valentina: "The way you speak!" ["*Ma come parla*!"], she exclaims in disgust.[82] The girl ends up consenting to talk to her only on condition the journalist stays mum: "I'll speak, and you listen." The critical bite of the episode seems to be turned against the journalist, but the fun is at Michele's expense, too: shoes are a constant obsession across Moretti's avatars, and the little anecdote implies that, by searching for a compromise, father and daughter have reached a solution whose net result was to displease both of them equally.

When the journalist asks Michele about the electoral campaign, he agrees to respond, and a flashback is prompted – but the wrong memory is introduced, an older campaign, not the one she wanted to know about. Even when they seemingly agree on the vocabulary, their mental referents are too dissimilar. From this the journalist infers that Michele must feel nostalgic for what she calls the "moral tension" of the 1970s, and she proceeds to parrot from a small book on the PCI she carries with her. Speaking as if she was rehearsing a poorly understood lesson – for, she admits, she usually covers sports, and knows little about her current subject – she starts reading aloud:

[82] Such words echo the title of Moretti's third and most elaborate early short, *Come parli, frate?*

"So, your party used to be revolutionary, but these days you are in parliament, fully integrated in the system…" Tentatively, as if she was trying to gather her own ideas: "Your comrades of the old days have betrayed, they have become rich and no longer fight for the ideals they used to… And there's no longer a model of socialism." Apparently without realizing it, she lectures Michele on how he is supposed to think and feel: "Today, it seems your entire life was a mistake," she casually informs him. In a rehearsed, grave, modest tone, Michele retorts: "No, the party has given me a lot." She, not as if arguing, but as if trying to put into words what she imagines he thinks: "For you, this is like a ritual that survives, but which has lost reference to anything concrete." Reading straight from the book as if it was made of self-evident truths, she patronizes Michele in an entirely unselfconscious manner: communists today are "resigned to being useless," she says, "they've become a party just like the other parties." Again recurring to safe, official formulas, Michele responds: "No, we are a force that is different from the others, even if we want to have the same rights the others have. Because we are the same, but we are different."

The journalist is depicted as a person with an appetite for the trivial and an utter lack of self-awareness, and this is consistent with the way journalists are portrayed in other Moretti films, from the Telecalifornia reporter sprouting clichés in *Ecce bombo* to the clueless commentators who in *We Have a Pope* follow the conclave as if it were a sports competition. The female journalist's flippant assertiveness in *Palombella rossa* is annoying, and we can easily see why this would get on Michele's nerves. Meanwhile, the stilted style of his delivery hints at the possibility that, in this dialogue, it might be she, rather than him, the one who expresses the director's actual views; or that *both* characters could be expressing contradictory facets of the filmmaker's mind. This intriguing hypothesis is reinforced by something Moretti has said in relation to a later film, one which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. Commenting on a scene in *The Caiman* where Moretti embodies the then Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a political figure he emphatically detests, the director says he tried to play it so that his

character's lines could be interpreted as speaking *both* his own mind and Berlusconi's:

> I play with a number of different things there, creating a sort of short-circuit between myself, [Berlusconi], and the spectator. When I [the character] say: "Look how sad the left is, it is so sad it makes people sad" – that's Berlusconi speaking, but it is articulated by me, who have often mercilessly criticized the left. Similarly, when I say: "I had cancer" – Berlusconi had cancer, and so did I. When I say: "My allies were fascists," I am using the character of the caiman to say things I actually think, to remind people that indeed they were fascists.[83]

Therefore, although the protagonist of *Palombella rossa* does voice the filmmaker's actual views to an extent (as Moretti's extracinematic statements attest), it is also possible that these very views are being cast in a critical light; indeed, that is my reading.

Michele does not possess an appropriate vocabulary to express his standpoint, something that his part in the dialogue makes plain. When the journalist speaks to him in ready-made journalistic formulas, he retorts not with an inspired, creative use of language, but with his party's worn-out maxims, which he recites with no conviction. "All his verbalisations are inconsequential and weak utterances, repetitions of specks of concepts said and heard thousands of times," as Mazierska and Rascaroli put it (2004: 139).

Only on one occasion will Michele seem short neither of memory or eloquence: in the middle of the water polo game, fighting off the sturdy Budavári and struggling to even stay afloat, he delivers a frantic rant against the hubristic ideology of the "end of history." With oppositional zeal, Michele rages against the notion that capitalism stands triumphant as the ultimate form of social organization:

[83] "J'ai joué sur de nombreux faits, un genre de court-circuit entre moi, le Caïman et le spectateur. Lorsque je dis: 'Comme la gauche est triste, elle est triste au point de rendre les gens tristes', c'est Berlusconi qui parle mais interprété par moi qui aient souvent jugé la gauche sans indulgence. Ou alors quand je dis: 'Quand j'avais une tumeur', Berlusconi a eu une tumeur et moi aussi. Quand je dis: 'Mes alliés étaient fascistes', j'utilise le personnage du Caïman pour dire des choses que je pense, pour rappeler qu'effectivement ils étaient fascistes" (Gili 2017: 121-122).

> No! No, no, no! I am not one of those who think – and they write it too, for it's the ideology in vogue – that all is for the best: that the Communist Party has lost its purpose, that capitalism has been able to solve its own contradictions. That ideology is vulgar and false, and we must fight it!

In interviews, the director has often commented on this particular scene, and on the apparent incongruity of a political diatribe delivered in the midst of a water polo game:

> I want people to actually see the physical effort, the exhaustion, what it takes to be a communist today. If I am in the water, if Budavári is marking me, and I yell "I am not one of those who think that capitalism has been able to solve all its contradictions", that isn't just bizarre. … The old words are worn-out, as is the old way of doing politics … Therefore, I want to say such things in the water, to exhaust myself, to show how difficult it is to begin again from scratch, and to make films in a different way, without relying on the same old clichés and routine.[84]

In a historical context that is decidedly hostile, this is a central part of Michele's effort, both within the swimming pool and outside of it. As Acireale pitilessly thrashes Monteverde, the present time of the action is repeatedly interrupted by flashbacks to the TV interview, a few days earlier, where Michele faced a panel of seven journalists. "This is an irreversible tendency and you know it," one of the reporters tells him with a smug grin. "How does it feel to be a party in decline?" When Michele makes a timid attempt to respond, another journalist (Mario Schiano) interrupts with sarcastic applause: "That's a good one! … Bravo! A true professional! Real show biz!" The entire panel laughs riotously at Michele's expense, just as Acireale's players did before the game. In politics as in sports, he faces opponents who exude triumphalism and arrogance.

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[84] Again Moretti associates the search for a new political vocabulary with his own effort, as a filmmaker, to convey such ideas in a novel form. "Je veux vraiment que l'on voie la fatigue physique et même la fatigue d'être communiste aujourd'hui. Si moi je suis dans l'eau, qu'Imre Budavari me marque et que je hurle … cela n'est pas seulement un film bizarre. Selon moi les vieux mots se sont usés ainsi que la vieille manière de faire de la politique, les vieux films de gauche sur la crise d'un militant. Je veux donc dire ces choses dans l'eau, me fatiguant moi-même, pour montrer la difficulté qu'il y a à recommencer à zéro et la nécessité de faire du cinéma de manière différente, hors des standards et de la routine" (Gili 2017: 49).

Like his fictional counterpart's, however, Moretti's own positive ideas about politics, expressed in interviews, seem tentative, and at times a tad obscure. The oxymorons the filmmaker arrives at are reminiscent of Michele's: "We can neither find nor want a new morality," the director tells the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. "To search for it, yes, but never find it – never."[85] He attempts to counter the dominant journalistic formulas he hates with his own, but it is not clear the latter do not suffer from the same kind of glibness, the very same kind of "facility" he is otherwise so harshly critical of. Reporting on the press conference given by Moretti at the Venice Film Festival (where *Palombella rossa* was first screened), the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic Frédéric Strauss wonders whether Moretti, caught up in a confrontational approach with the Italian press, does not end up feeding the very same sort of simplistic public discourse his film supposedly denounces. In the critic's view, the distance between the filmmaker and the fictional character is so thin that Moretti hazards being perceived as his own caricature.[86]

But that may have always been the risk the director was willing to take – or indeed not just the risk, but the very point of his rhetorical manoeuvre. In Millicent Marcus's estimation, this is a pointed form of satire – of "complicitous critique" – that is simultaneously, and inextricably, aimed at society and at oneself.[87] "In *Palombella rossa*," Marcus notes (2002: 289), the protagonist "rails against the use of meaningless jargon and pretentious bombast, while himself delivering the most clichéd of orations." And, because of the ambiguous commingling of filmmaker and fictional character, in Marcus' view this process implicates not just Michele but also the actual

[85] "Ce qui compte, c'est la capacité de résister à la vulgarité dominante, mais pas pour trouver ou vouloir une nouvelle morale. La chercher, oui, mais la trouver, jamais" (Toubiana 1989b: 26).

[86] "Tout se passe en fait comme si, entre le cinéaste et l'acteur, la frontière se faisait médiatiquement de plus en plus mince, menaçant de placer Moretti au rang des personnages de folklore institutionnalisé. … A ce rythme, Moretti peut craindre de voir chacune de ses déclarations prise dans un moule aussi réducteur que les jargons journalistiques ou politiques qu'il dénonce dans son film" (Strauss 1989: 30).

[87] On the idea of "complicitous critique", Marcus is following Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1993). "Social critics cannot escape the very cultural practices they condemn in others and there is no 'outside' from which to stand apart and judge" (Marcus 2002: 289).

Moretti.[88] This neatly parallels my analysis of self-representation in *Ecce bombo*, discussed in the previous chapter.[89]

The troubles of political commitment

The flashbacks in *Palombella rossa* compose three narrative threads, referring to Michele's childhood; his young activist years; and a recent TV debate. "Each flashback has a distinct and recognizable setting, indicated through the mise-en-scène," as Eleanor Andrews points out. "Each flashback builds on the last, and their compilation gradually reconstructs Michele's lost identity and memory" (2015: 84). In Andrews' assessment, the narrative they compose is straightforward: despite the child's reluctance in taking up water polo, and the young man's misgivings with regards to political commitment, Michele will eventually become both a sports player and a politician.[90] If one looks at the flashbacks themselves, however, this interpretation seems overly linear: from one scene to the next, Michele's conflicts only deepen, and they do not end up in resolution. Instead of interpreting these flashbacks as a sort of *bildungsroman*, it might be more apt to think of them as Michele's repressed memories, which had previously been subdued but now return in a moment of crisis.

The second childhood flashback of *Palombella rossa* is inserted as the game between Acireale and Monteverde is about to start. Once again, it conveys Michele's early reluctance to take up the sport. This time, the boy looks on as other children engage in a swimming competition, while, by the side of the pool, their parents frantically shout instructions and encouragement. A particularly shrill father yells nonstop to his son: "*Impegnati*! *Impegnati*!" The spectacle does not please Michele, who turns to

[88] "Michele's dual position as focalizer of the satiric vision and object of it is replicated on a second level by Moretti the author, whose self-casting as the lead character both implicates him in the film's social criticism and allows him to judge his protagonist from a safe, ironic distance" (Marcus 2002: 289).

[89] See the conclusion to chapter 4.

[90] "The childhood flashbacks … show how Michele's reluctance and fear turned into acceptance of his role within the team. His unwillingness parallels his political development, where at first he was hesitant, but later he became part of the communist grouping" (Andrews 2015: 85-86).

his mother, smiling affectionately at her, and in voice-over comments he is glad she does not behave in such a manner.

While the annoying father's instruction could be simply translated as "Try harder!", the word "*impegno*" also carries another echo: in Italy, it is the usual way of referring to political commitment, especially on the part of public figures. To say that an artist or an intellectual is "*impegnato*" would be the Italian equivalent to the French "*engagé*," a term which, for historical reasons, is not as easily rendered in English.[91] Its history is usually referred back to *J'accuse*, the pamphlet the novelist Émile Zola (1840-1902) published in 1898 to denounce anti-Semitic prejudice in the wrongful conviction of the young French officer Alfred Dreyfus for treason. The Dreyfus Affair, which consumed and polarized public opinion in France for a full decade, is generally seen as the first time a writer claimed his authority *as a writer* to speak as the moral consciousness of the nation.

The notion of the writer's authority on public matters may have been inaugurated by Zola, but it was the particular spin the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) put on it, half a century later, that would be more consequential to Moretti's historical and political context. The French existentialist espoused, theorized, and personally embodied the view that intellectuals had a duty not just to take part in such discussions, but to commit to a particular position: to make choices, possibly to make mistakes, to decide under imperfect circumstances, engaging with events as they happen.

Sartre's stance, articulated in his 1948 essay *What is Literature?*, emerged out of the experience of living in occupied France under Nazi forces, and developed at the height of the Cold War, with its neat division of the world into two camps. Sartre views the intellectual as someone who takes sides in a polarized situation. He himself was a member of the French

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[91] While this tradition of public engagement is obviously not exclusive to France, it remains to this day more pronounced in continental Europe than in English-speaking countries, be it because the latter never had significant communist parties, or because artists and intellectuals do not accrue quite the same social status there as they do in Italy or France.

Communist Party for a period, from 1947 to 1956, eventually breaking ranks when Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest. After that, Sartre would remain a committed man of the left, tirelessly lending his support to political struggles the world over, but no longer having to toe a party line. Sarah Bakewell describes:

> His new approach appealed more to activists who did not want to join any party but who were active in new-style liberation movements, especially the protests of the 1950s and 1960s against racism, sexism, social exclusion, poverty and colonialism. Sartre threw his weight behind these struggles. (2016: 272)

The high tide of political engagement in the Sartrean sense would be the years 1968-1975; after that, the reflux was quick, with the philosopher's own physical decay coinciding with the closure of a 30-year period in which the left had, generally speaking, been on the ascendancy. Moretti started making films precisely at the ebb of this period, and his work is from the start centrally concerned with issues of political commitment. The films bathe in (and satirize) an intellectual atmosphere Bakewell evokes in the following manner:

> [Students] loved the existentialists, and especially Sartre's idea of bad faith. "I'm sick of my own pretending," exclaimed a student one day. The best of them were also the most likely to drop out: they would vanish in search of a more meaningful path. (2016: 292)

The description resonates closely with the derisive portrait Moretti paints in *Ecce bombo*, where one memorable character phones a radio talk show to insist he is – indeed – "sick of his own pretending".

Sartre's twin ideas of personal freedom and political commitment resonated strongly with the student protests of the late 1960s. According to his formula, the human being is condemned to be free, having to define her own course of action, with all the risks this entails and all the angst such a situation is bound to induce. The imperative to take sides is at once existential, moral, and political. Amidst a situation where no objective moral rules exist, where nothing is pre-given, the individual has to create her own

rules, thus giving meaning to her own life; in this sense, political commitment can be thought of as a personal response to an existential dilemma. The injunction to get politically involved is an ethical one too, but since it deals with a political situation, it often asks one to take positions that challenge one's immediate ethical impulses: it compels us to "get our hands dirty."[92] Politics is inherently messy, requiring one to sacrifice knee-jerk, conventional moral responses in order to appraise the circumstances with a more complex understanding. Sartre was wary of spontaneous personal feeling as a basis for political engagement; instead, he invited us to examine a historical situation "from the eyes of the least favoured."[93] Ultimately, such a view might justify the permissibility of murder, and indeed insist that was the only really moral position.[94]

The intellectual who subscribes to this conception is like a soldier always ready to attention, to respond to the demands that are being made upon her. This gives the writer a sense of urgency and self-importance. Bakewell recounts:

> Authors had real power in the world, [Sartre] said, and they must live up to it. ... [Simone de] Beauvoir recalled how urgent all such tasks seemed: she would read of some incident that fired her up, think at once "I must answer that!", and rush out an article for publication. (2016: 163)

If we read *Palombella rossa*'s flashback through a political angle, then it seems that, from an early age, Michele had his doubts about *impegno*. Like politics, sports are a collective endeavour, and Michele isn't naturally a team player; like politics, it requires a level of commitment he doesn't always seem to be comfortable with. Michele manifests qualms about being conscripted

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[92] Sartre's 1948 play *Dirty Hands* (*Les Mains Sales*) deals with personal and moral dilemmas attendant to political commitment. It debates the need for violent action (including killing), the loyalty to an individual (a friend, a loved one) versus loyalty towards the collective (the party), and it probes the very psychological motivations for political engagement: does the protagonist get his hands dirty out of political necessity, or personal vendetta?

[93] "Disagreements inevitably ensue about *who* exactly is least favoured at any moment. Each time an underdog becomes an overdog, everything needs to be recalculated. Constant monitoring of roles is required – and who is to do the monitoring?" (Bakewell 2016: 272).

[94] "Camus just kept returning to his core moral principle: no torture, no killing – at least not with state approval. Beauvoir and Sartre believed they were taking a more subtle and more realistic view" (Bakewell 2016: 162-163).

into action in a public battleground, as he later will struggle with the constraints politics will impose on his individualist and sceptical tendencies.

The theme of political engagement is overtly at the centre of the flashbacks that depict Michele in his young adult years. These are for the most part represented in the film through fragments of *La sconfitta* (*The Defeat*, 1973), one of Moretti's earliest shorts, which appear in *Palombella rossa* with no acknowledgement of their original source. The image of young Moretti in *La sconfitta* (where he played a fictional character under the name of Luciano) is therefore used as a direct stand-in for young Michele, even though they are in principle two different characters in two discrete fictional worlds. This kind of continuity is made possible, of course, by both characters' reliance upon Moretti's physical features.

Together, the three snippets of *La sconfitta* build up a story – with a beginning, a development, and a conclusion – which goes precisely in the opposite direction to the *bildungsroman* implied by Andrews. The first scene is introduced when, in the present time of *Palombella rossa*, Michele encounters his old friend (Traversa) speaking to the journalist, at a café by the side of the pool. She tells Michele they are talking about how the two friends first met. "Fifteen years ago…", the guy says, "Do you remember?" Since *La sconfitta* had been shot precisely fifteen years before *Palombella rossa*, the parallel invites us to see the fictional character as an embodiment of the filmmaker, as if Michele's friend was addressing the *actual* Moretti.

A flashback is at this point prompted which is accompanied by the nondiegetic sound of film rolling, as if to justify the relatively poor quality of the image (*La sconfitta* was shot in Super 8). In the old film, Traversa asks Michele (or Luciano) why he decided to become a communist. Michele explains:

> Firstly, because I believe it is the right thing to do [*giusto*]; because you don't feel isolated; because you're with others who believe in the same things you do, who feel the way you do, along with you… You are part of a world movement that is moving forward; you take life as it is [*la realtà*], and you try to transform it. Because you love humankind, you try to bring it out.

This little profession of faith is worth pausing on. The urge to break from a feeling of isolation is a recurring motif: even if the title of Moretti's first feature film (*I Am An Autarkist,* 1976) proclaimed otherwise, the declaration of self-sufficiency had always been ironical, directly contradicted by the very opening sequence of that initial feature film. Additionally, this professed love for humankind (not as it is, but as it *should* be) brings to mind the short political statement Moretti makes, twenty years later, in *Dear Diary*: "I believe in people," he will say, only to immediately add: "I just don't believe in the majority of people." It is a way of loving humankind, but not in the way it currently presents itself. Finally, Michele's early proclamation includes a kind of historical optimism ("a world movement that is moving forward") which by the time of *Palombella rossa* was impossible to sustain.

Whatever happened to those lofty ideals? When the flashback comes to an end, Michele's friend (Traversa) is still asking: "Do you remember?" Now he repeats the question six times, in an uninflected tone, which makes it sound almost like an accusation. Michele does not respond, but instead turns his back on Traversa. However, the conversation between his friend and the journalist goes on, and Michele cannot help overhearing it: the friend now bemusedly evokes another episode from their youth, the day they hounded a fascist and forced him to walk around school with a sign hanging from his neck that said, "I am a Fascist worm. Spit on me." That was the day, the friend says, he began to take Michele seriously, something he previously couldn't do, because of Michele's frivolous enthusiasm for water polo.[95] Michele reacts with incredulity: "What a horrendous scene! Did that really happen? You were there and so was I?" "– Naturally," the friend replies, impassive. Visibly pained, Michele bows his head down, unable to reconcile the way he feels with what people say about him.

The flashback is then introduced, apparently to confirm the reality of the episode the friend has just evoked. Differently from the other flashbacks, however, this one is not the protagonist's subjective recollection; it could

[95] This anecdote has a biographical basis, as previously indicated.

either be an objective event (the way things *really* happened), or a speculative flashback (the way things could have happened, if we were to trust the friend's word). We cannot discern the young Michele in the image, for the very simple reason that this one is not a fragment of an old film, but rather footage originally recorded for *Palombella rossa*: for Michele to feature in the scene, Moretti would have had to look fifteen years younger.

The old episode with the fascist adds to the collage-like, fragmented quality of *Palombella rossa*, weaving together yet another film texture. "That is not my kind of cinema," Moretti notes in an interview with the *Cahiers du Cinéma*: "When my character, Michele, exclaims, 'What a horrendous scene!', it is as if he was a filmmaker who wanted to cut a scene out of his movie."[96] Moretti does not indicate the precise way in which the flashback differs from "his kind of cinema", but the idea that his own picture contains different film styles is an important one throughout his oeuvre, from the "false start" of *Ecce bombo* (1978) to that of *Mia madre* (2015). *The Caiman* (2006) will encompass clips from seven different films (including actual TV footage, scenes from actually existing films, and fragments from pictures that obtain only in the fictional realm of *The Caiman*). In such cases, the excerpts of a film-within-the-film invariably stand for types of cinema Moretti thinks are incompatible with his own; what is more, they represent film styles he *dislikes*. Such is explicitly the case in the opening scene of *Ecce bombo* (addressed in the previous chapter), but the fictional protagonists of both *The Caiman* and *Mia madre*, while partly autobiographical, also make films that are clearly very different from Moretti's.[97] These discordant film textures may also entail a diversity of thematic meanings: critics have suggested that the visual "ugliness" of some scenes in *The Caiman* should alert us to their

[96] "Par deux fois, il y a ce flash-back de la scène du fasciste avec le carton autour du cou: c'est un type de cinéma qui n'est pas le mien … Mon personnage, Michele, dit: '*Quelle scène horrible!*', comme un cinéaste qui voudrait retirer un scène de son film" (Toubiana 1989b: 26).

[97] For a discussion of the implications of different film textures in *The Caiman*, see chapter 6, particularly the section titled: "The swamp".

nightmarish content, an idea which could easily apply to this flashback in *Palombella rossa*.[98]

Whether Michele was indeed present in the high school episode or not, the way political commitment is depicted in this second flashback is definitely less romanticized than in the first. It is as if the idealism of the earlier flashback was now seen in a distorting mirror: here is Michele finally being "part of a movement" with "others who believe in the same things," and yet the notion of justice they are fighting for seems much less holy, and collective action rather less glamorous, than his younger self might have imagined.

The fascist from the school episode shows up later, by the side of the swimming pool, as Michele is pacing around and saying to himself: "I'd like to remain faithful to the ideals of my youth."[99] When he encounters the fascist, Michele apologizes for his part in the high school incident, but the fascist nonchalantly responds that he, for his part, has no regrets: "I'd do the same thing over." A very minor character in Moretti's following picture, *Dear Diary*, seems almost like a reincarnation of said fascist: at one point, the protagonist of *Dear Diary* (Nanni Moretti) enters a movie theatre where three characters on the screen commiserate about the lost illusions of their youth. One of them is the same actor who in *Palombella rossa* played the fascist – possibly the same fictional person. "We used to shout awful, violent slogans in our protest marches", one of them says: "Now look just how ugly we've become!"[100] To the characters' litany on the screen, the protagonist of *Dear Diary* triumphantly responds: "*You* shouted awful, violent slogans, *you*'ve gotten ugly; I shouted just slogans, and now I am a splendid 40 year-old!" In *Palombella rossa*, the

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[98] This is an idea Moretti underscores in interviews: "I feel huge affection for Bonomo the film producer, but not for his films." "J'ai énormément d'affection pour Bonomo le producteur, pas pour ses films" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 44). Similarly, upon the release of *Mia madre*, he says "there are many autobiographical aspects [to Margherita] but not that one: I didn't want her to make movies *à la Nanni Moretti*" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 16). "Dans le film il y a beaucoup de références autobiographiques, mais pas celle-ci: je ne voulais pas qu'elle fasse un film 'à la Nanni Moretti'" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 16).

[99] In an interview, Moretti says this statement was inspired by something Enrico Berlinguer had said in a speech. To put it in his protagonist's mouth is another way for Moretti to pay tribute to the late communist leader. "Cette phrase, dans sa simplicité, est inspirée d'un discours prononcé par Berlinguer" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 109). More on Berlinguer below.

[100] On a visual level, the film-within-the-film in *Dear Diary* is "horrendous" (as Michele – and Moretti – might put it), visually standing out against the rest of Moretti's film.

encounter with the fascist leads Michele to conclude he can't speak to someone "*so* fascist": "You know what? I am not unbiased. I'm not one of those who have no preconceptions, who are above it all, who discuss everything serenely." He wishes to remain faithful to the ideals of his younger self; in the meantime, though, those ideals carry a haunting baggage.

For the female journalist of *Palombella rossa*, the recollections of Michele's youthful activism sound entirely amusing, so she begs Traversa for more: "Other anecdotes, curious episodes from those years?" Michele repeats the latter phrase several times, as if appalled to see his biography turned into a series of silly sketches.[101] When he walks away from the area, his old friend stands up to shout yet again: "Do you remember, Michele? Do you remember? Do you remember? Do you remember?" In its flat repetition, this time it sounds almost like a curse: just as he is afflicted by his own amnesia, Michele is tormented by other people's memories. This, again, is an impression Moretti confirms in interviews: other characters' recollections represent their way of forcing Michele to conform to their expectations. "He can't remember for the very simple reason that he does not want to be the person others expect him to be: he wants to be someone else."[102]

The second snippet of *La sconfitta* will then emerge when – in the present time of the action – Michele misinterprets the journalist's request to speak about "the campaign". This time the scene depicts the young Michele handing out a political newspaper, with the front-page title: "Let us rekindle the anti-imperialist struggle." He enters an apartment building, buzzes on a door, and is greeted by a child, who tells him his parents are at work; after hesitating for a moment, Michele takes a second look at the front page, and decides not to give it to the child. He pauses again before buzzing on the next door, and then abruptly leaves the building altogether, dropping a bunch of newspapers on the floor outside, as he runs away. Again, the portrait of

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[101] Moretti uses this same trope of making the protagonist repeat unpleasant phrases both later on in this movie, in Michele's quarrels with the journalist, and in later films, like *Aprile* and *The Son's Room*. I describe the scene of *The Son's Room* below, in the section titled "Why are words important?" The scene in *Aprile* is discussed in chapter 6, in the section titled "A first-person political outlook".

[102] "Lui ne se souvient pas, parce que, justement, il veut être autre chose que ce à quoi les autres l'identifient" (Toubiana 1989b: 26).

political engagement this provides is quite unappealing: Michele is alone, struggling to reach out to people who are not there because (unlike him) they have to work. Realizing, perhaps, the political distance between the slogans he carries and the actual lives of those he is trying to address, he departs hastily, somewhat cowardly, getting rid of the newspaper in embarrassment or even shame. In Andrews' view (2015: 87), the scene also foreshadows Michele's misgivings about the news media;[103] I am inclined to agree only to the extent that the newspaper's headline conforms to a type of hackneyed jargon.

In Berlinguer's shadow

The next *La sconfitta* flashback deepens this crisis of faith. Before addressing it, however, it is worth pausing on the scene that immediately precedes it in *Palombella rossa*, which is brief but rich with allusions. Around the swimming pool, in the present time of the action, Michele loses patience with Simone, the Catholic activist. Simone is a true proselytizer, one who never wavers in his mission: even when Michele declares himself to be "atheist and materialist", Simone insists that Catholics and communists "really are alike." His suave but unflinching persistence irritates Michele, who ends up pushing Simone away so hard that he falls to the ground. Allegorically, Simone's insistence on the similarities between Catholics and communists could insinuate, perhaps, the risk of diluting the communist identity as a consequence of PCI's strategy of "Historic Compromise."

In the previous chapter, I have already alluded to this political strategy, devised in the 1970s by Enrico Berlinguer, then leader of the Italian communists, in an attempt to break the condition of permanent exclusion from national government the party had been confined to since 1948. Berlinguer did this by trying to assuage fears, especially amongst the middle-classes, about the PCI's intentions: under the conditions prevailing in late

[103] "This is symbolic of his rejection of the media and of the written word in particular, seen later in [the film]" (Andrews 2015: 87).

20th century Italy, the communists accepted that their path to power would not entail revolutionary means, but rather depend upon gradual changes to be achieved within the existing institutions. In an effort to salvage the democratic regime, which in Berlinguer's assessment was in danger, the Italian Communists offered a compromise to both the Socialist Party and the Christian-Democrats (the main right-wing party), going so far as to provide parliamentary support, between 1976 and 1979, to three successive governments led by the Christian-Democrat Giulio Andreotti. In *Palombella rossa*, as he tries to recover his political spiel, Michele repeats, somewhat cryptically, at several points: "The Catholic question is inseparable from the question of the centre. We must work to conquer the centre." There is some hesitation in the way Michele asserts this, again suggesting he is repeating an exhausted slogan. By the late 1980s the "historic compromise" was no longer a viable strategy, but the PCI didn't seem to have come up with a new framework to replace it. Berlinguer himself had died, suddenly, in 1984, befallen by a brain haemorrhage as he was addressing a public rally – at the age of 62.

The rationale which led the Communists to offer an alliance to the parties to his right was that even if the Left were to achieve a slight majority of votes, they might still not be able to govern against the other half of the country. Berlinguer saw Salvador Allende's experience in Chile as a cautionary tale: there, in 1973, a democratically elected government of socialist leanings had been deposed by a violent military coup, after years of turbulent political confrontation.[104] Berlinguer's concern was grounded in the serious episodes of political violence Italy experienced throughout the 1970s, promoted by both the far-left and the far-right, and which would go so far as to include the kidnapping and killing of Aldo Moro, the very Christian-Democrat leader Berlinguer had reached a compromise with, as well as a number of bombings promoted by neo-fascist groups, with the complicity of elements of the secret services and the military, of which the killing of 85

[104] Moretti's recent documentary *Santiago, Italy* (2018) attests to the central, formative role the events in Chile had for the filmmaker's generation.

people at the Bologna train station, in 1980, is perhaps the most infamous. For Berlinguer, it was crucial that Italy should avoid the path of confrontation.

Therefore, throughout the 1970s the Italian communists tried to perform a tough balancing act: without forfeiting their communist identity, they aimed to be seen as a viable party of government in a country that was (and remains) an important member of NATO. The conundrum this created is ironically hinted at multiple times throughout *Palombella rossa*. In the TV debate, one of the members of the panel (Mario Schiano) provocatively asks: “My watch is set on New York time; is your watch set on New York time too?” Sheepishly, Michele retorts: “I believe the Communist Party has taken a very clear stance regarding the foreign policy of our country,” and proceeds so slowly that a younger assistant (played by filmmaker Daniele Luchetti) sitting next to him has to whisper at his ear the words Michele can’t bring himself to say. Michele (morosely): “The acknowledgment of Italy’s participation…”; his assistant: “…in NATO”. Later on, Michele will practically beg: “Why do you think it impossible that the Communist Party should govern? What’s wrong with us? Is it our program? What else do we need to do? What else do we need to do?” His tone turns increasingly sentimental, even lyrical, as he says this, until Michele is literally singing. Finally, by the end of the water polo game, as he prepares to take the decisive penalty, Michele asks, as if to himself: “Why all this fear? We are a movement like any other, even though we are different.”

This same topic – the need to placate the “red scare”[105] – is taken up humorously a few years later, in *Aprile*, the film that chronicles both the birth of Moretti’s son and the Italian Left’s first victory ever in a general election in Italy (in 1996). Putting his face next to his wife’s belly, Moretti (playing himself) speaks to his unborn son:

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[105] The term is used to refer to the promotion by the US government of fear and paranoia about communism, especially in the periods 1917-20 and 1947-57. Its extension to the Italian situation is not misplaced, however, considering the role the US State Department and the CIA played in the first Italian general election after World War 2nd, in 1948. To an extent, anti-communism remains an important element in the Italian political landscape to this day.

> Pietro, this is daddy speaking! Please give me another month and a half. I need just another month and a half, so I can finish the documentary I've told you about, the one about the election. I must record the electoral campaign of the right and that of the left – well, of the centre-left, the centre-centre-left… They insult us, but we must not hit back. We must reassure. We must reassure… We must reassure… [He fondles his wife's stomach as he says this, as if to both calm down the baby and to imply that voters are being treated like infants.]

True to his persona, the protagonist of *Aprile* has a hard time with this moderation, and in the following scene he is utterly exasperated as he watches the pre-election debate on TV. "Say something left-wing!", he pleads with the then leader of the centre-left coalition. "Say something not even left-wing, just say something civilized! D'Alema: say something – just say anything! React!"[106] Moretti covers his eyes with his hand, as a little child trying to cancel the world with that gesture. "I don't want to see this, this is torture!" He becomes so agitated that in the next scene he is out on the street trying to find someone to get into a fight with.

By Moretti's own account, *Palombella rossa* responds to the political atmosphere that followed Berlinguer's death. By then, the ambition of having the PCI accepted as a mainstream party with a shot at the national government had already foundered: it had quickly evaporated after the 1976 regional elections. To borrow a phrase used by the frantic militants of *Palombella rossa*, the Italian communists "lived in the opposition, and they would die in the opposition."[107]

For Moretti, Berlinguer's death was an emotional event, one of the most significant in his political memory.[108] It marked, symbolically, the end of an era; what followed was a period of uncertainty and confusion, to be

[106] Massimo d'Alema (b.1949) was the head of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) between 1994 and 1998, and Italian prime minister between 1998 and 2000. His name will be forever associated with Moretti's phrase in *Aprile*.

[107] Commending Michele for some rebellious act he can't recall having done, the two militants accuse the party's leaders: "They are afraid to win. They want to stay in the opposition and they shall die in the opposition."

[108] Moretti pairs it with the moment he learnt of Aldo Moro's kidnapping and killing by the Red Brigades. "Les deux premières moments qui me viennent à l'esprit [as impactful political events] sont la mort de Berlinguer et l'enlèvement et l'assassinat d'Aldo Moro" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 18).

represented on the screen by this amnesiac character who struggles to say anything definite. Before coming to this specific way of representing the political moment, Moretti had toyed with the idea of making a film literally set against the backdrop of Berlinguer's death:

> I considered other, more conventional narrative possibilities [for this film]. I was actually quite fond of one of them. It resembled a film by the Taviani brothers, *I sovversivi* [1967], from 25 [*sic*] years prior, which dealt with characters at the moment of Togliatti's death.[109] My film would be about four characters at the moment of Berlinguer's death. I felt that particular moment marked the end of an era: it was the closing of the 1970s, even if it occurred in 1984.[110]

Palombella rossa retains some echoes of the Tavianis' film, both on the level of individual scenes and in its nonlinear narrative style, with abrupt editing transitions. The eulogy for the dead comrade through which Michele finds out he is a communist is possibly a nod to a scene in the Tavianis' film where, sitting next to the casket of the recently deceased communist leader, Muzio (Pier Paolo Capponi) delivers a mock-funeral tribute for his friend, Ermano (Lucio Dalla), who is a communist and who is (alive) sitting right next to Muzio. Moretti ended up not following through this initial idea, he says, for "there would have been the danger of turning the film into something nostalgic – about something that was and is no more. On the contrary, I wanted to make a film about the 'post-Berlinguer' period, about today, in a contemporary style."[111]

For Moretti, the 1980s are the threshold into something new, and he is not optimistic about what is coming up. Again, his main concern at this point

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[109] Palmiro Togliatti (1893-1964) was at the head of the Italian communists from the moment of Gramsci's imprisonment in 1926 all the way to Togliatti's own death almost four decades later.

[110] "J'avais d'autres possibilités narratives, mais plus traditionnelles. L'une me plaisait quand même beaucoup (elle ressemblait d'ailleurs à celle d'un film des frères Taviani, *Les Subversifs*, fait il y a 25 ans avec des personnages au moment de la mort de Togliatti): faire le film autour de quatre personnages au moment de la mort de Berlinguer. Pourquoi justement ce moment ? Parce que j'avais l'impression que c'était la fin d'une époque – celle des années 70, même si c'était en 84" (Toubiana 1989b: 24).

[111] "Q: *Pourquoi as-tu laissé tomber l'idée de l'enterrement de Berlinguer?* A: Pour des raisons de structure: cette version-là aurait été plus linéaire, plus traditionnelle, ça ne m'intéressait pas. Cela risquait aussi de rendre le film nostalgique: quelque chose qui existait et qui n'existe plus. Au contraire, ce qui m'intéressait, c'était de faire un film sur 'l'après-Berlinguer', sur aujourd'hui, dans un style contemporain" (Toubiana 1989b: 25).

is not sectarianism, the danger that the PCI may flee into dogmatic positions, but rather the risk of "homogenization": the impression that the PCI is in the process of becoming just like the other parties, "a bit like in the American system."[112] There is a prescient aspect to this last remark: after renaming itself as the more inclusive Democratic Party of the Left, the former communists did eventually morph, in 2007, into the Democratic Party, its current designation.

As it turns out, *Palombella rossa* was not Moretti's first work to draw inspiration from *The Subversives*: by the director's own account, the short *La sconfitta* already bore the influence of that film. "The memory of *The Subversives* should be quite visible in *La sconfitta*," he has said. If the Tavianis' film sets the story of five fictional characters against actual footage of Berlinguer's funeral, *La sconfitta* similarly edited together the existential crisis of a fictional young activist with actual footage of a large workers' demonstration.[113] The fact that both *Palombella rossa* and *La sconfitta* pay tribute to the Tavianis' film indicates yet another affinity between these two works by Moretti: in both of them the protagonist goes through a political crisis that doubles as an existential crisis, and both films manifest an ambivalent, ironic attitude towards political commitment. Moretti himself describes *La sconfitta* as "the comical and tragic story of a political crisis combined with an existential crisis."[114] If it is true that *Palombella rossa* comments on a particular historical moment, a particular defeat, it is also clear that Moretti's preoccupation with such themes precedes the fall of the Berlin Wall by far.

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[112] "La mort de Berlinguer a touché beaucoup de gens, parce qu'on avait l'impression, juste ou pas, qu'une autre période allait commencer. La sensation, peut-être erronée, que le PCI allait se rapprocher d'avantage des autres partis, un peu à la manière du système politique américain. Comme un processus d'homogénéisation" (Toubiana 1989b: 24).

[113] "Dans l'élaboration de la structure de *La sconfitta*, un film des Taviani a beaucoup compté, *I Sovversivi*. … Le film décrivait les funérailles de Togliatti, tout en alternant quatre ou cinq histoires de communistes … Le souvenir de *I sovversivi* devait être assez conscient dans *La Sconfitta*, avec cette grande manifestation des ouvriers métallurgistes entrecoupée de la crise traversée par un jeune membre de la gauche extraparlementaire" (Chatrian and Renzo 2008: 26).

[114] "C'était l'histoire comique et tragique d'une crise politique mêlée à une crise existentielle" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 54).

The third *La sconfitta* flashback comes up in *Palombella rossa* when the water polo match is suspended to fix Monteverde's broken goal, after Budavari's potent shot. In the flashback, young Michele (or Luciano) talks to a presumably more senior comrade (Luca Codignola), sharing his personal qualms. The other guy tries to make him toe the line, with an assortment of recognizable Maoist catchphrases which are presented in a series of jump cuts, as if to express a form of stuttered logic:

> Imperialism, social-imperialism, and its lackeys! … The union bureaucrats have betrayed the workers! … It is the struggle between two lines … Bourgeois culture or proletarian culture! ... We must not mistake the secondary contradiction for the primary one! … Opportunism doesn't pay! … To establish a bond with the masses, we must act according to their needs and their wishes!

A meaningful dialogue isn't really possible. Exasperated by the vacuity of such proclamations, Michele/ Luciano lets it all out: "But let's be frank – what do we care about the masses?" Affronted by the blasphemous remark, the senior comrade violently slaps him.

If there is one thing this sequence of flashbacks does not seem to convey, it is the fortifying tale of how Michele overcame his misgivings to become a committed political leader. While the older comrade is autocratic and insufferable, Michele/Luciano is unable to see past his narrow self-interest. There are no redeeming figures; both characters "are portrayed as rather ridiculous and irritating," in Guido Bonsaver's estimation.[115]

A spiralling structure

Flashbacks in *Palombella rossa* never provide a straightforward, explanatory key that would account for what happens in the present, but rather a more or less oblique commentary, a sort of echo that often casts current narrative events in an ironic light. In one instance, a flashback seems to intimate that

[115] "Luciano betrays the egoism and indifference lurking under his social commitment, whereas the other man is incapable of having a conversation without referring to abstract political notions. This rather scathing view of left-wing militancy is not counterbalanced by the presence of more positive characters" (Bonsaver 2001: 160).

memory is not always reliable. Speaking to the journalist, by the side of the pool, present-day Michele wistfully evokes the intense joy he felt as a child when he had the chance to accompany the older squad: “At that moment, I felt really happy. It’s not that I’d like to go back to my mother’s womb, or any of that stuff,” he says. “But to be there again, as a child, carrying those bags…” The present-day conversation is edited together with a flashback where Michele, as a child, looks anything but pleased. Struggling to carry large bags, he whines to himself: “If only I had chosen another sport, or even the piano… If the day they asked me, I had said tennis, then at least I wouldn’t be lugging these bags around. I hate these jerks who make me carry their bags. This is the last time I’ll follow the team! I’ll never play water polo!”

In another, more complex sequence, a past event visibly impedes Michele’s capacity to respond to what is currently happening before his eyes, suggesting the past to be an active force interfering in the present. An entire sequence, lasting for several minutes, swings back-and-forth between two different timeframes. In the present, Michele watches from the bench as Acireale thrashes Monteverde; the coach sits next to him, unceasingly yelling instructions to the team. Although Michele tries to focus on the game, and even makes an attempt at accompanying Mario with some incitement of his own, the latter’s incessant, high-pitched screeching proves too distracting, and this prompts a flashback. In it, Michele is once more by the pool, a child amongst other children. All of them are summoned into the water, but, whereas the others take the plunge, Michele holds back, pleading with his mother he would prefer to play some other sports. From inside the water, a man, perhaps the swimming teacher, threateningly commands Michele to dive in, but the boy fiercely resists; a bitter argument ensues between the two.

At this point, the film reverts to the present day. Mario is now calling Michele into the game, but it turns out he had fallen asleep and was having a nightmare – that is, the flashback we just witnessed was Michele’s dream. Still half asleep when he first hears Mario’s voice, Michele cries and says

"no!" Then he jumps into the pool, but immediately starts behaving just the way he did as a child, paralyzed by fears and hesitations. He keeps the whole game suspended as he gets twice out of the water with obvious dilatory manoeuvres – first asking for eye-drops, then for tactical instructions. When the game is finally set to recommence, Michele has yet one further request: "You never talk to me about yourself," he says to Mario. "You never talk to me about the things that matter in your life. I know nothing about you, about your memories." The demand is outlandish on the surface; perhaps Michele is begging for a collective project that makes room for his subjective needs, as he did in the scene from *La sconfitta*. At this point, we swivel again to the childhood flashback, where the standoff between Michele and the swimming teacher goes on. The child yells at the top of his lungs, while the teacher threatens to take him into the deep-end of the pool. Silence takes over the entire swimming pavilion, everybody hanging on the quarrel between the man and the little boy. Finally, the child takes the plunge, and yet he still resists, holding himself to the rails of the pool, until the teacher physically drags him.

Back in the present, Michele is similarly frozen. He holds the ball but is unable to do anything with it. Covering his eyes with one hand, he complains the water has too much chlorine: "It didn't use to be like this," he moans. Past and present get mixed-up in his mind: he says he is afraid of deep-water, and claims he can't move forward. Mario, the players on the bench, and, eventually, the entire audience (in a Greek chorus) plead with him to calm down, but Michele doesn't budge, busy fighting ghosts. Finally, he swims with the ball, and, as this happens, soothing nondiegetic music takes over the soundtrack, while the image turns into slow motion, emphasising its plastic beauty. Once again, the water becomes a refuge – an idyllic one – from people's frantic yelling. Michele looks happy as he tries to dribble past an opponent – but then he loses the ball, allowing Acireale to

score once more, and bringing the idealized slow-motion to a halt.[116] From the bench, one of the youngest players rages in frustration, scolding Michele for his carelessness; the coach tells Michele to come out, have a rest. As he walks out of the pool, the protagonist seems entirely absorbed in his own thoughts, as if he did not even register his teammates' disappointment; and yet the words he mutters as if to himself are significant, an indirect response to their grievances. "It is not that in the Communist party some are anguished and some are not. We are all very worried." This brings the political allegory to the fore, explicitly reminding us of the parallels between water polo and politics, between Monteverde's situation and that of the PCI. The pool is both a haven from politics and the site for collective engagement – an engagement to which he strongly resists.

The entire sequence is strong in rhymes: the coach's yelling, at the beginning, echoes the father who unceasingly pestered his child demanding "*impegno*" in the earlier flashback. Grown-up Michele is visibly annoyed by this kind of injunction, just as he was as a child. When Mario tells Michele to get into the game, the scene with the bullying swimming teacher replays in his mind, so that, even in the absence of any actual dangers, Michele exactly replicates his earlier fears and hesitations. The memory of the swimming teacher carries a degree of physical force, which echoes the episode with the senior comrade of *La sconfitta*. Finally, Michele plunges into the action, and for a moment he seems to forget about all these troubles; but immediately he makes a mistake, which again forces him to face his responsibilities towards the team, and he is once more drawn into reality and into self-questioning.

In all of this there are parallels – between the present and the past, between sports and politics. But the concept of parallelism seems too static to

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[116] A sequence in *The Son's Room* (2001) will echo, in abridged form, both this scene and a later one in *Palombella rossa*. Irene (Jasmine Trinca), the teenage daughter of the protagonist, plays basketball. At an away game, Irene tries to dribble past an opponent, loses the ball, and the other team scores. Irene aggressively protests with the referee, claiming she was fouled, and as a consequence gets sent off. Then an opponent quarrels with her, and Irene punches her. The spectators become intensely vociferous, as if they were about to invade the basketball court. Irene confronts the crowd, and, as a consequence, she gets suspended for several games. The scene takes place after her brother's death, and conveys the emotional state she is in. Irene and her parents travel back home by bus, in an echo of Michele's initial journey with the team in *Palombella rossa*.

capture what is going on, for the different levels intersect. Events occur at one level which move on to the next one, interfering in it, and pushing the second level itself to develop, and so on, in succession. While the various spheres are distinct, they aren't quite separate. There is "a certain porosity between the various levels … as if one could glide almost imperceptibly from one dimension to the next."[117] This is Moretti speaking of *Mia madre*, a much later film, but the description perfectly suits *Palombella rossa*.

The sentimental element

Besides the flashbacks, the narrative flow of *Palombella rossa* is punctuated by scenes from David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago*. When it comes to the relationship between the various small threads which interact within Moretti's film, the way the snippets of this old movie connect to the main action is perhaps the most mysterious element of all. A political link seems to be implicit, since *Doctor Zhivago* has a strong political back-story: the film is based on Boris Pasternak's novel of the same title, an epic set in the context of the 1917 Russian revolution. The book, which was *originally* published in Italy in 1957 by the left-wing editor Giangiacomo Feltrinelli after being covertly smuggled out of Russia, became a powerful anti-Soviet propaganda weapon; in the year following its publication, Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

However, Lean's film has a sentimental rather than a political emphasis, and the fragments included in *Palombella rossa* are conspicuously non-political. With no prior familiarity with *Doctor Zhivago*, its political message would be obscure. The emphasis on the love story could conceivably be part of Moretti's very political point: the crushing of the personal hopes of the film's romantic pair at the hands of the revolution signals a conflict between individual and collective aspirations that is also thematized in *Palombella rossa*. This impression is strengthened once we learn that, prior

[117] I've quoted Moretti's remark in full in the previous chapter, in a section discussing the director's affinities with art cinema as a mode of narration. See the section titled "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody".

to choosing *Doctor Zhivago*, Moretti considered using a different film, Sydney Pollack's 1973 romantic drama *The Way We Were*, starring Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford: there the relationship between the romantic pair is also challenged, and ultimately foiled, by larger political forces.[118] On the other hand, the notion that Lean's film should be taken seriously on the strengths of its political content is dubious. In the introduction to Moretti's interview with *Cineaste*, the critics Richard Porton and Lee Ellickson describe *Doctor Zhivago* – not implausibly – as "a film that reduces a … cataclysmic revolutionary crisis to Hollywood kitsch" (1995: 157). Is Moretti's appropriation a straightforward homage, or should it be taken ironically?

Four fragments of *Doctor Zhivago* are included in *Palombella rossa*. The first insert takes over the entire screen and soundtrack, with no explicit introduction, and no immediate identification of a source; only the distinctive texture of the imagery (that of an enlarged TV broadcast) and the presence of major international stars make plain that a break of some kind has been introduced. In this first scene, the villainous, wealthy Komarovsky (Rod Steiger) violently quarrels with the young heroine, Lara (Julie Christie). Their dialogue is dubbed in Italian. The scene then cuts to a medium shot to reveal Michele and the bartender (Mario Monaci Toschi) attentively watching Lean's movie on a small TV set placed inside a cantina, next to the swimming pool.[119] The bartender exclaims: "This movie is appalling! Despite my professionalism, I can't control myself. I suffer!"

The reference to "professionalism" sounds farcical in the context, something that is reinforced by the way the bartender pronounces the word, with an exaggerated rolling of the r; the same emphatic, slightly baffling proclamation is voiced by both the referee and the journalist at several points. This cliché seems to be a way for Moretti to poke fun at people who claim to be bound by a special set of norms that would make them somehow objective, dispassionate, above the fray – exactly the opposite attitude to the one he

[118] "Pendant l'écriture du scénario, j'hésitais entre *Nos plus belles années* et *Docteur Jivago*. Je voulais une histoire d'amour mêlée de politique, et qui finissait mal" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 118).

[119] The cantina was purposefully built for the film (Toubiana 1989b: 26).

consistently reclaims for himself. Moretti's comments to *Cahiers du Cinéma* at the time of the film's release further illuminate the allusion, which refers to a sort of worldview that emphasises technical accomplishment above all else. Moretti was by this point particularly aggrieved by a tendency he seemed to detect among young screenwriters to create overly polished movie scripts, which in his view resulted in mediocre films; he says he conceived the convoluted narrative structure of *Palombella rossa* in part as a reaction to that.

> These days there are thousands of young screenwriters ready to make a very neat, very agreeable kind of cinema, a middling cinema that takes no risks, and which does not interest me in the least – either as filmmaker, as spectator, or as producer. I still have a link to the auteur cinema of 25 years ago.[120]

Such a notion of "professionalism" is not confined to the political arena, but it does have political implications, something the filmmaker explicitly signals through an analogy which has a Brechtian ring:

> One must run the risk of displeasing a part of the public, and, for the PCI, a part of the electorate: the party cannot please everyone – and it should not even try to do that. The same goes for young filmmakers: they should not be making films for everybody.[121]

Indeed, the German playwright insisted that the actor should not aim to please every member of the audience; instead, she should remind spectators of the conflicts that in the present society divide them from their fellow human beings. Brecht wrote:

> [The actor] does not treat [the audience] as an undifferentiated mass … He does not address himself to everybody alike; he allows the existing divisions within the audience to continue, in fact he widens them. He has friends and

[120] "Aujourd'hui, il y a des milliers de jeunes scénaristes prêts à faire un cinéma tout beau, tout gentil, un cinéma moyen qui ne risque rien, et qui ne m'intéresse ni comme metteur en scène, ni comme spectateur, ni même comme producteur. Je reste lié au cinéma d'auteur d'il y a vingt-cinq ans" (Toubiana 1989b: 22).

[121] "Ces dernières années, le Parti Communiste … ne prenait aucun risque, alors qu'il faut risquer de mécontenter une partie … des électeurs: il ne doit pas et il ne peut pas représenter tout le monde. C'est la même chose pour un jeune metteur en scène: il ne doit pas faire un film pour tout le monde" (Toubiana 1989b: 24).

> enemies in the audience; he is friendly to one group and hostile to the other. (1964: 143)

Moretti thus compares the screenwriters whose polished screenplays he hates to the PCI's increasingly technocratic approach. In a vain attempt to content the medium voter, he says, the party fails its mission: "It seems the PCI was led to believe it had to be more 'professional', technically more prepared, than the other parties … But that can't be the sole purpose of a Communist party!…"[122]

After the bartender's remark, the scene reverts to a close-up of the TV set, so that *Doctor Zhivago* takes over the entire screen once more, with Komarovsky scolding Lara in a threatening tone, advising her not to marry the young man she is engaged to. When Lara snubs the admonition, Komarovsky slanders her: "There are two types of women…", he starts – but Lara covers her ears, so as not to hear the words. Mimicking the gesture, Michele and the bartender cover their ears too.[123] Then Lara slaps Komarovsky in the face, and he slaps her right back. Komarovsky concludes: "You, my dear, are the type to sleep with." Outraged, Michele yells, as if to the character on the screen: "Pig! Pig!" At this point, Valentina, who had not previously been introduced, emerges from behind, shouting alongside Michele. Surprised to see each other, the two start chatting, but they make no mention to what they have just watched. Instead, Valentina asks if they can leave, but Michele retorts he can't, because his teammates like to have him around. Again, a political meaning could be implicit: at this difficult juncture, Michele will not abandon his comrades.

The way Michele and his daughter react to the movie on TV mirrors the behaviour of spectators in a sports game: the two insult a fictional character with the kind of slander fans often throw at referees. Towards the

[122] "A un moment donné, il a semblé que le PCI devait être, disons, plus 'professionnel' que les autres parties, comme un metteur en scène se doit d'être professionnel préparé, avec des techniciens… Le Parti Communiste n'existe pas seulement pour ça…" (Toubiana 1989b: 24).

[123] The way they mime the characters on the screen brings to mind a passage of the Tavianis' *The Subversives* where the climactic scene of Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965) takes up the entire screen, and then Ermano (Lucio Dalla), watching it, apes Jean-Paul Belmondo's gestures in the film, just like the characters in *Palombella rossa* mirror those in *Doctor Zhivago*.

end of the film – or rather, towards the end of *both* films, Moretti's and Lean's, as the decisive moment in the water polo game meshes with *Doctor Zhivago*'s climactic scene – the analogy between film spectatorship and sports fandom is reinforced, in an implicit nod to Brecht's idea that theatre spectators should become less reverent towards the stage. In his early writings especially, the German playwright often contrasts sports fans favourably to theatrical audiences:

> We pin our hopes to the sporting public. Make no bones about it, we have our eye on those huge concrete pans, filled with 15,000 men and women of every variety of class and physiognomy, the fairest and shrewdest audience in the world … *Against that the traditional theatre is nowadays quite lacking in character.* (1964: 6 – emphasis in the original)

As Michele is about to make his third and final attempt to throw the decisive penalty, suddenly, as if pulled by an invisible, magnetic force, spectators, players, and the referee leave their places and move like sleepwalkers towards the bar to watch the ending of *Doctor Zhivago*. There is nothing realistic in the way the scene is depicted: people walk so quietly one can hear the gentle sound of the water in the pool, giving a solemn, almost religious aspect to the procession. At this climatic moment, the sound of *Doctor Zhivago* coming from the small TV set takes over the entire soundtrack of *Palombella rossa*. In Parigi's reading, the sequence brings to mind a bygone era, where going to the movies took up a central place in collective life in Italy. It is a fantasy with nostalgic overtones:

> The spectatorial situation around Lean's movie brings to mind … the longing for a collective ritual that belongs in cinema's past, and also in the filmmaker's own personal past. The excerpts of *Doctor Zhivago* have the same regressive force of the flashbacks portraying the protagonist's childhood. (Parigi 1998: 316)[124]

On the screen (within the screen), Lara and Zhivago (Omar Shariff) part for the last time: she boards a train, looking back as she leaves,

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[124] "La situazione spettatoriale che si crea intorno al film di Lean evoca … il rimpianto per un rito collettivo che appartiene ormai al passato del cinema e insieme al passato esistenziale del regista. Gli inserti de *Il Dottor Zhivago* hanno la stessa forza regressiva dei flashback dedicati all'infanzia" (Parigi 1998: 316).

emotionally torn; teary-eyed, Zhivago raises his hand to bid farewell, but only (quite melodramatically) when she is so far away she can no longer possibly see him. The water polo audience within *Palombella rossa* is utterly spellbound, no one saying a word – "look[ing] at the stage as if in a trance," as Brecht would put it (1964: 187). Michele nervously bites his nails as he watches. The bartender requests to be warned when the critical moment comes, so he can leave: again he insists he "can't bear to watch the scene." Maurice Jarre's epic musical score for Lean's film takes over the soundtrack – in Brechtian terms, the effect is entirely "narcotic".

Then, as the final scene begins, the bartender walks away hurriedly, covering his head with his hands. Zhivago spots Lara from the window of his tram and tries to reach her; now, Michele and the spectators are frantically engaged with what they see.[125] As if they were watching events unfold in real time – indeed, as if they were following a sports match, not a film – the audience shouts, to try to warn the characters on the screen: "Turn around!", the spectators scream, trying to alert Lara to Zhivago's presence. "Knock!" Michele begs Zhivago, "Knock!" – and he makes the gesture of knocking – "Let him off the tram!" Zhivago gets out of the car, but he collapses on the street before he can reach Lara. In a desperate, final gesture to try to call her attention, he raises his right arm, and falls to the ground with a heart attack, just next to a large Communist statue. "No!", the spectators within Moretti's film yell in frustration and disappointment. "The scene stages the audience's inevitable passivity," Moretti says in an interview, spelling out the Brechtian point. However, it also enacts a Brechtian transformation, in that they become agitated and active, like sports fans.[126]

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[125] Cruciani points out that a scene in *Bianca* echoes this missed encounter: in that earlier Moretti film, the protagonist is on a bus when through the window he sees the title-character, with whom he is in love. Michele hurries to hop off, but when he gets on the ground she has already vanished – as if she had magically disappeared, more a vision than an actual human being. "Zivago, proprio come era accaduto a Michele con Bianca, vede Lara del tram, la chiama ma lei non sente, non si volta" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 17%).

[126] "C'est … une mise en scène de l'inévitable passivité du spectateur" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 57). In response, the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics notice that the spectators' impotence in this scene matches Moretti's in the aforementioned segment of *Aprile* where the protagonist pleads desperately with D'Alema's image on the TV set.

"Needless to say, I've seen *Doctor Zhivago* many times," Moretti tells *Positif*, only to add, paradoxically: "This evening, I would like it to end differently."[127] Naturally, *Doctor Zhivago* does not end well, and neither does the water polo match: immediately after Lean's film, the game resumes, and Michele misses the penalty, his final chance to avert his team's defeat. In the same interview Moretti includes another illuminating detail about this scene:

> I had written a dialogue, and I think I even shot it, but then decided not to include it in the film. In that dialogue, I say to my daughter, who is in the veranda studying [also next to the swimming pool], "Let's go downstairs and watch the film." And she says, "But you know it ends badly." And I retort: "Well, maybe tonight it ends well."[128]

Moretti eventually decided not to include the scene because, he says, it might guide the spectator towards something "too specific."[129] The political metaphor implied by the anecdote seems clear: with its unhappy – even "sadistic" – ending, *Doctor Zhivago* echoes the water polo match, and both speak metaphorically to the history of Italian left. [130]

What matters in the way Lean's movie functions in *Palombella rossa* is clearly not the political content of *Doctor Zhivago*. To start with, the fragments included in Moretti's film are not enough to compose a coherent narrative about what goes on in *Doctor Zhivago*. If the unhappy ending of Lean's melodrama speaks to the political theme of *Palombella rossa*, it does so metaphorically, but only in a loose sense: in form rather than content, in the same way a water polo match could conceivably speak metaphorically to the history of the Italian left, without anyone ever asking about the "political content" of the game. *Doctor Zhivago* is not incorporated in *Palombella rossa*

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[127] "Je ne le dis pas mais on le comprend, j'ai vu le film de nombreuses fois, ce soir-là je voudrais que le film se termine de manière différente" (Gili 2017: 57).

[128] "J'avais écrit une réplique et je crois même que je l'ai tournée, puis ensuite je n'ai pas voulu la monter. Dans cette réplique, je dis à ma fille qui est en train d'étudier dans la véranda: 'Allons en bas voir le film.' Elle me répond: 'Mais tu sais bien qu'il finit mal.' Et je lui rétorque: 'Peut-être que ce soir il se termine bien'" (Gili 2017: 57).

[129] "Je n'ai pas voulu monter cette réplique parce qu'elle accompagnait trop le spectateur vers quelque chose de précis. Cependant on comprend: ce film que nous avons vu tant de fois avec tout le public, nous voudrions que ce soir ça se termine bien" (Gili 2017: 57).

[130] In an interview in 1990, Moretti says: "Trovo il finale di un sadismo incredibile" (De Bernardinis 2006: 10).

as a "film of ideas", but rather for its sentimental excess. Moretti explicitly suggests that in his film "the sentimental aspect, the love element, comes as a shock from the outside, through a movie watched on television, a movie about love and politics."[131] In the earlier *Sweet Dreams*, Moretti had used a similar structure, with Michele's love life erupting in the parallel story-world composed of the protagonist's nightmares.[132]

In a 1990 interview, Moretti says his opinion about Lean's film has gone through various stages:

> *Doctor Zhivago* is a film I have seen in different ways over the years. I first saw it, in a rather uncritical manner, when I was a little boy; then, when I was around 20 and was beginning to make films, I considered it to be very far from the kinds of films I liked, from ones I wanted to make, and even from those I wanted to see. But then there was a third time, about ten years ago … this time it moved me, especially the first part.[133]

There is little question of Moretti aiming to undermine, ironically, *Doctor Zhivago*. If irony is there in the way he appropriates Lean's film, it is not aimed at this old-time tearjerker, the kind of movie one might watch, it is implied, on a weekend afternoon on TV; I think the irony is aimed at Moretti himself, at undermining *Palombella rossa*'s own gravity.

Indeed, all the manifestations of emotion in Moretti's film, particularly salient towards the end, are consistent with the aesthetic excess of *Doctor Zhivago* – an excess to which the spectators within the film respond themselves with inordinate pathos. The two activists express their outrage in an ever-more strident manner, especially as they take up the microphone and start voicing outlandish complaints through the swimming pool's sound

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[131] "La dimension de l'amour, du sentiment, arrive comme un choc de l'extérieur par le biais d'un film vu à la télévision, un film d'amour et politique" (Gili 2017: 57).

[132] In *Sweet Dreams*, Michele leads a double life, one half composed of his daytime preoccupations (as an insufferable young filmmaker), the other half of his nightmares, where he is a disgruntled high-school teacher infatuated with one of his students. In his daytime existence Michele has no emotional attachments, except to his mother (with whom he has a conflicted and patently infantile relationship), but in his dreamworld the sentimental element is overwhelming.

[133] "*Il dottor Zivago* è un film che con il passare del tempo ho sempre visto in maniera diversa, nel senso che quando ero un ragazzino lo vedevo in maniera abbastanza acritica, poi, riguardandolo intorno ai vent'anni, quando incominciavo a occuparmi di cinema, lo considerai lontanissimo dai film che mi piacevano allora, da quello che volevo fare e che volevo vedere. Poi c'è stata una terza volta, una decina di anni fa … e mi ha invece coinvolto, soprattutto nella prima parte" (De Bernardinis 2006: 10).

system: "Don't you know there are people who write to us and we never write back?", they incongruously yell. The audience grows ever more unreasonable (insulting the referee, turning physically threatening), and this eventually culminates in a collective jump into the pool, to celebrate the fact that Michele has just missed his final shot. The players, too, engage in punching fights, at one point turning the swimming pool into a scenario of generalized mayhem. As ever, Michele's behaviour is the most extravagant of all, not just for the disproportionate irritation with which he responds to the journalist's annoying lingo, but also for his erratic – and yet apparently good natured – behaviour towards his daughter: the way he picks on her, quarrels, and then immediately, without missing a beat, offers to make amends.[134]

The expression of emotion in *Palombella rossa* is never sensible, never contained, but rather explodes in an entire atmosphere of unreasonableness. And yet the key to the political resolution of sorts that Michele finally finds lies precisely in this sentimentality. Facing the journalists in the TV panel, towards the end of the film, he for once begins to address the oft-repeated question ("What does it mean to be a communist today?"), and quickly bursts into singing an Italian pop song, whose lyrics one would inspect in vain for a political meaning. What the protagonist seems to be after is something other than a rational argument. As Parigi points out:

> From *Palombella rossa* onwards, songs, which had already occupied such an important place in Moretti's earlier films, take up ever more clearly a liberating role, allowing for the release of instincts for too long kept on a leash. The desire for a musical which emerges in ever more overt ways across

[134] It might be worth recalling that Valentina shares her name with two characters from previous Moretti films, *Ecce bombo* and *The Mass is Ended*. In both instances, the protagonist's sister was called Valentina. Ironically, whereas in those earlier films Michele tried to act in a fatherlike manner towards his sister, in *Palombella rossa* he behaves more like a competitive brother towards his daughter, constantly nagging her. On Michele's relationship with his sister in *Ecce bombo*, see chapter 4, in the section titled "Intimacy and politics in *Ecce bombo*".

> his oeuvre – from *Sweet Dreams* to *The Mass Is Ended*, from *Dear Diary* to *Aprile* – expresses a similar meaning.[135]

Palombella rossa is, of course, a political film, but in an absurdist vein, and this is the cause for which Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* is recruited – not despite the fact that it is a weepy, but rather because of that.

Why are words important?

The slapping scene between Komarovsky and Lara in *Doctor Zhivago* is echoed three times in Moretti's film: in the flashback (from *La sconfitta*) where Michele's comrade had smacked him for making a blasphemous remark; in a scene where Michele slaps the female journalist interviewing him; and, in the middle of the water polo game, when Michele punches an opponent. These scenes call for close scrutiny, particularly if we are to figure out what to make of Michele's protestations about the importance of words. They are even more significant given the fact that Michele's remarks on these issues reflect very closely Moretti's own opinions, as expressed in interviews. Michele's brawl with the journalist is particularly problematic since it takes place between a man and a woman, and therefore arguably carries a heightened echo of the fight between Komarovsky and Lara. The gender imbalance is crucial to the scene from Lean's film, the slander Komarovsky proffers on the occasion being indisputably sexist; if accepted, this analogy would align Michele with the villain. On the other hand, it is also worth noticing how in Lean's film it is Lara who slaps Komarovsky first, and she does so in reaction to something he says; similarly, Michele smacks both the journalist and the Acireale player out of irritation with things they say. Moreover, in the water polo match the offending phrase is clearly misogynistic: when Michele complains of a somewhat aggressive tackle by his opponent, the latter retorts: "This is no sport for ladies." When he is sent off

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[135] At the time of Parigi's writing, *Aprile* was Moretti's latest feature, but the director's use of songs over the past two decades remains consistent with her analysis. "Da *Palombella rossa* in poi la canzone, che già tanta parte ha nei film precedenti di Moretti, assume sempre di più questo carattere liberatorio, di abbandono a pulsioni troppo a lungo controllate. Significato non diverso riveste la voglia di musical che attraversa come in incubazione, ma sempre con meno difese, il suo cinema, da *Sogni d'oro* a *La messa è finita,* da *Caro diario* fino a *Aprile*" (Parigi 1998: 314).

by the referee for punching the Acireale player, Michele is outraged about the words his opponent uses, rather than about being thrown out of the game: "He used an annoying expression, and I punched him. Referee, it's been 30 years I hear this! … It's not what he said: it's the expression that is irritating."

Right after Michele is sent off, a flashback is prompted which offers slanted commentary on Michele's squeamishness. It does *not* show us Michele's first encounter with the offending remark, 30 years prior; instead, it depicts Michele (as a child) stealing a large cake from a baby, and being sent to jail as punishment. It is his own father who informs him, in all seriousness, that there is no other option: "Your mother and I are sad, but this is our decision. You are certainly not the first person to go to jail for sweets." Michele does not utter a protest: impassively, with a severity of demeanour vastly beyond his years, he packs a large suitcase and walks to prison all by himself. The parallel seems straightforward: then as now, Michele was punished for his bad behaviour by being sent away – first from his home, then from the game.[136] In both instances, he accepts the sanction practically without complaint.

The twist comes next: walking down the road, carrying a large suitcase on his way to jail, young Michele suddenly realises he is wearing slippers. This he cannot take: "Mama, mama!", he screams. "Where are my shoes? I can't go out in slippers!" The shock of finding himself wearing slippers on the street wakes him up in a panic, revealing the child to be in bed, yelling: the entire flashback was actually the memory of a nightmare. And when young Michele wakes up, the editing cuts back to present-day Michele, who also wakes up. It turns out this was a dream-within-a-dream: grown-up Michele dreaming that his young self was dreaming; the reality status of the scene

[136] "Michele viene eliminato e il pubblico inveisce in coro contro di lui. Proprio in quell'istante, egli rammenta un'altra espulsione, ben più lontana: quella dalla propria casa, imposta dal padre como punizione per il furto di una torta" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 16%).

becomes uncertain.[137] The trauma reverberates through the decades, and now Michele, sitting by the side of the pool where Monteverde and Acireale go on playing, screams like the younger version of himself: "I can't go outside in slippers!" Michele hardly seems to notice the game proceeding right in front of him. Instead, he goes after the journalist, pleading with her to change the expressions she attributed to him in the interview. With the transcript in hand, he is outraged: "I don't speak like that! Change this expression! You have to change it!" He is incensed not by the ideas she attributes to him, but by the words she puts in his mouth: "Negative *trend*"[138] he bellows: "I can't even utter such an expression!" For her, the protest makes no sense: she concedes she might have "summarized a few concepts, but without changing the substance." For Michele, in turn, the issue is key – as vital (or so the editing seems to suggest) as being caught out on the street wearing slippers.

The parallel between Michele's indignation about the words the journalist attributes to him and his strong opinions on shoes seems to invite us to take his vehement protestations about "the right words" in not too serious a manner. An obsession with footwear is a well-established trait of Moretti's avatars. The revulsion for slippers, more specifically, is recurrent in his work, manifested first in *Bianca* and hinted at again in the first episode of *Dear Diary* ("On My Vespa").[139] The rationale for this particular phobia (or for the obsession with footgear) is never quite spelled out: it is simply one of the character's quirks. Similarly, a sort of hypersensitivity to words, social fads, clichéd expressions emerges in practically every one of Moretti's films, and this is often (though not always) explored for comical purposes.[140]

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[137] The dream is not explicitly cued as grown-up Michele's dream; it is only when he wakes up by the side of the swimming pool – i.e., in hindsight – that we realize he had been asleep. The same applies to his younger self's journey to prison, which is only revealed to be a nightmare when Michele wakes up in bed. Thanks to the absence of an external boundary marker, it is impossible to say whether the childhood anecdote represents an objective event, or merely Michele's subjective recollection, or even his fantasy.

[138] The word "trend" is in English in the original.

[139] One of the reasons why the protagonist of *Dear Diary* despises the Roman suburb of Casal Palocco is the fact that its residents have the habit of walking outside in slippers. This nefarious practice seems to epitomize all that is wrong with a suburban lifestyle.

[140] The caveat is required, for there is evidently nothing comical about Giovanni's indignation with the words the priest uses at his son's memorial in *The Son's Room*. More on this below.

There is a serious rationale behind Michele's gripe with journalistic platitudes, for the choice of vocabulary in itself carries unstated assumptions.[141] However, the way the issue is presented in *Palombella rossa* also invites us to consider an element of arbitrariness in Michele's outrage. When he first meets the journalist, Michele immediately contorts himself, as if her rhetoric could make him physically sick. His revulsion is aesthetic just as it is political; it seems to even have a snobbish element, as if her words would hurt him for being so tacky. When he explodes, and slaps her across the face, it is not so much the ostensive meaning of what she says that incenses him, but rather her matter-of-factly incorporation of modish English vocabulary ("cheap", "kitsch", "trend"). In an interview, the filmmaker expands on the topic:

> She says "cheap" and "kitsch". It's not so much the expressions themselves I find annoying, and certainly not the fact that they're foreign words. What bothers me the most … is the journalistic lingo, words which are there just to signal that one belongs to the "smart set". As a matter of fact, such expressions do nothing but streamline, trivialize, brutalize reality.[142]

Many of Michele's statements in the film are remarkably similar to things Moretti said at the time of *Palombella rossa*'s release, leaving no doubt that, in this regard at least, the character is speaking the director's mind. The use of clichés is thought of as a moral problem: "He who speaks badly thinks badly, and lives badly! Words are important!", Michele exclaims, in what has become perhaps the most oft-quoted commonplace of Moretti's entire oeuvre. Elaborating on this critique, Rosa Barotsi and Pierpaolo Antonello (2009: 198) define cliché as "the detachment between meaning and linguistic enunciation," and note it takes two major forms: neologisms which do not really add anything new, and which are used mostly for conveying a false sense of cleverness; and tired expressions (such as the trade unionist's) which

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[141] In his interview with the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Moretti is forceful on this point, which he illustrates with a number of examples (Toubiana 1989b: 23).

[142] "La journaliste giflée dit 'cheap' et 'kitsch'. Ce ne sont pas tant ces expressions qui m'irritent – et certainement pas le fait qu'il s'agisse de mots étrangers –, ce qui me dérange le plus … c'est le jargon journalistique, ces mots qui laissent entendre qu'il y a complicité entre 'gens intelligents'. Mais, en réalité, ces expressions banalisent, ne font que simplifier, brutaliser la réalité" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 56).

have survived their referents, and now point back only to themselves. In both its guises, the cliché promotes obfuscation. Cruciani sees a close affinity between the female journalist's clichés and those the senior comrade had spewed in response to Michele's doubts in the excerpt from *La Sconfitta*, going on to suggest that Michele's slapping of the journalist is a delayed response to the earlier aggression.[143] Criticism of the cliché "does not imply a lack of faith in the role of language on the part of Moretti," Barotsi and Antonello observe (2009: 199); all to the contrary, it seems to rest upon the utopian aspiration to a plain, non-distorted use of language, an almost religious belief in the power of words to express authentic meaning.[144] Indeed, in *The Son's Room* (2001), the protagonist, Giovanni (Moretti), can hardly contain his ire at the priest's rhetoric on the occasion of the mass in memory of his son, Andrea (Giuseppe Sanfelice). Back at home, he repeats the priest's words with contempt, disbelief, and indignation:

> *Giovanni:* "If the master of the house knew that the thief would come, he would not be robbed." The thief, the master of the house – what kind of shit sentence is that?
>
> *Paola:* It's just a sentence, it doesn't matter.
>
> *Giovanni:* But what is it? What the hell does it mean? What the fuck is it supposed to mean?
>
> [Giovanni breaks objects.]

While his wife Paola (Laura Morante) focuses on her grief, Giovanni concentrates on his anger. Like the protagonist of *Palombella rossa*, he would like to find "the right words" that would speak to his pain. "*Dobbiamo trovare le parole giuste*," Michele insists in *Palombella rossa*: not just the "correct", the "appropriate" ones, but also those that manifest a sense of justice. The

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[143] "Lo schiaffo alla giornalista è … quello che, a su tempo, avrebbe voluto dare, precedendolo, al compagno, reo di usare un linguaggio altrettanto arido e preconfezionato" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 17%).

[144] The critic Gustavo Micheletti (1990) associates these views with those of the post-Marxist philosopher Jürgen Habermas, but there is a folksy ring to them that rather brings George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" to mind: "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink" (1957 [1946]: 154).

gulf between language and life as it is experienced is a long-standing problem Moretti has relentlessly pursued over the years.[145]

Moretti's criticism of language in *Palombella rossa* is political in nature and pointed in its historical context, for it is not simply jargon in general, but *contemporary* jargon he sees as a problem. "We must remain indifferent to today's words," Michele says. The prevailing ways of speaking *at this historical juncture* are slanted against the left. As an ideological bulwark of the prevailing orthodoxy, journalists come in for criticism. The parallels between Michele's words and those of Moretti, in interviews, are very close. "We must reject the journalistic discourse, a way of speaking that is facile and crude," the filmmaker says in an interview.[146] "We must fight against journalism, against the wrong words!", Michele proclaimed in the swimming pool:

> We should not read, we should not even write, for an idea, as soon as it is written, becomes a lie. I hate the written word! A man's life becomes forever soiled the moment someone mentions it in a magazine's article.

And in an interview with the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the filmmaker expands on the concept:

> [We must] resist the [supposedly] modern, facile things, a kind of vocabulary which works because it is easy. If you assimilate this fashionable language, this kind of cant, you end up thinking in a trivial manner. We must resist this rampant crassness ... One must oppose the prevailing morality, the dominant consensus.[147]

I've added the word "supposedly" between brackets to indicate that Moretti does not mean to oppose modernity as such: he makes this clear by sometimes using quotation marks around the word "modern". His target is a kind of

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[145] When shooting a scene of a demonstration for *her* movie (within the fiction realm of *Mia madre*), Margherita mulls over the specific words the protesters should shout. The difference between two possible slogans seems very minor, but she agonizes about this minor difference.

[146] "Il faut résister au langage journalistique, à une façon de parler facile et vulgaire" (Toubiana 1989b: 23).

[147] "C'est un fait de résistance: résister à la modernité, aux choses faciles. Ce langage marche parce qu'il est facile. Assimiler un langage à la mode ou un jargon fait penser d'une manière plus triviale. Ce qui compte, c'est la capacité de résister à la vulgarité dominante, mais pas pour trouver ou vouloir une nouvelle morale. La chercher, oui, mais la trouver, jamais. On doit s'opposer à la morale dominante, au consensus" (Toubiana 1989b: 23).

rhetoric, widely disseminated at the time, which identified the "modern" left with its abandonment of a critical stance vis-à-vis capitalism. Moretti liked Berlinguer, he declares in a 1985 interview, because the late communist leader was "neither Stalinist nor 'modern', *in quotation marks*" (emphasis added).[148]

Finally, in interviews, Moretti repeatedly claims that his protagonist's struggle with language, his effort not to give in to clichés, mirrors his own struggle as a filmmaker. *Palombella rossa* would attest to this effort, by being a political picture which does not rely on a kind of ready-made narrative format. Thus the film's form – characterized by fragmentation, juxtaposition, collage – is supposed to match its subject matter, Michele's staunch rejection of the kind of language mainstream discourse has to offer.

The rhetorical strategy

Throughout Michele's interactions with the female journalist, there is little doubt that our affinities predominantly lie with him.[149] Meanwhile, if we are to understand how our allegiance to the protagonist's views and attitudes is created and maintained, we have to keep his unpleasant features in sight, particularly in the slapping scene.[150] Indeed, the director recounts with satisfaction the discomfort he could sense in the audience in response to that scene, when the film was first screened, in September 1989, at the Venice Film Festival:

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[148] "Berlinguer incarnava quasi fisicamente, nella faccia, nei vestiti, un modo diverso di fare il politico. Non era stalinista ma nemmeno 'moderno', tra virgolette" (interview with M. Serra, "Naufraghi in città", *Epoca*, Nov 8, 1985, *apud* Bonsaver 2001-2002: 167).

[149] I assess spectatorial engagement by Murray Smith's parameters: "To become allied with a character, the spectator must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits in relation to other characters within the fiction. On the basis of this evaluation, the spectator adopts an attitude of sympathy (or, in the case of a negative evaluation, antipathy) towards the character, and responds emotionally in an apposite way to situations in which this character is placed" (Smith 1995: 188).

[150] Following Smith, I speak of "allegiance" to the fictional protagonist to refer to what in common parlance is known as "identification". Smith's concept is meant to avoid the conflation between "alignment" – "the way a film gives us access to the actions, thoughts, and feelings" of a character – and the way the film "marshals our sympathies for or against" said character (i.e., allegiance) (Smith 1995: 6). Smith admits the existence of a culturally learned tendency to expect that greater psychological access to a character will encourage the viewer to see the character in a positive light; still, this expectation of a positive relation between being aligned with and having allegiance to a character is contingent, and it is confounded in many films.

> One could distinctly hear laughter in the room, then silence, and then some clapping. There was clearly a moment of stupefaction. In just a few seconds, all kinds of reactions were conceivable.[151]

The slapping is not unique in Moretti's oeuvre; instead, Michele's unpleasantness is a prominent trait of his all avatars. Violent outbursts are recurrent: in *Ecce bombo* he slaps his father across the face, in *Sweet Dreams* he gets into such a nasty physical brawl with his mother that she ends up on the ground, and in *The Mass Is Ended* he again hits his father. The theme uniting *Bianca* and *The Mass Is Ended* is the protagonist's inability to accept other people's faults, and in *Bianca* this intransigence is taken to an extreme: Michele literally murders those whose behaviour he disapproves of. By turning his protagonist into a serial killer, one might say, Moretti inserted an obvious distance between his character's attitude and himself; and yet, even then some spectators would refuse to admit the protagonist's faults, according to the director's own testimony.[152]

In Marcus' (aforementioned) discussion of Moretti's "complicitous critique," she suggests that Michele's evident, even flaunted shortcomings could end up reinforcing rather than undermining our allegiance to him. In practically all his filmic avatars, Moretti expresses a kind of rigid moralism that could easily strike us as preachy, if it weren't for the fact that the filmmaker himself undercuts this excess through irony; furthermore the mockery is addressed not just at the fictional character Moretti embodies, but also patently at himself. The close adherence between the filmmaker's and the character's ideas in *Palombella rossa* does not stop the film from including a few critical nods about Michele, to the point of bringing to light the protagonist's nastier, more pedantic, snobbish, or simply prejudiced sides. It is in fact not unusual for Moretti to make his filmic alter ego express his

[151] "On entend parfaitement dans la salle un rire, puis un silence, puis des applaudissements. On sent qu'il y a comme un moment de stupeur. … En l'espace de quelques second toutes les réactions sont envisageables" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 114).

[152] See previous chapter, particularly the close of the section titled "Actors versus characters".

own, actual views, while at the same time casting them in ridicule.[153] Rhetorically, this seems like a very effective move: we accept such views more easily because their limits are underscored. Far from sabotaging his position, the protagonist's excess makes us more rather than less sympathetic towards him.

Moretti performs this move in a particularly transparent manner in *Aprile*, a film composed of fictionalized episodes that draw upon actual events, where he plays under his own name. In a charged scene, in terms of its ethical, dramatic, and documentary appeal, the filmmaker heads to Brindisi, a beach on the Adriatic coast, where a few days earlier a boat with Albanian immigrants had accidently been struck by an Italian navy vessel, killing more than 80 people. The events, which took place on March 28th, 1997, became known as the "tragedy of Otranto", after the strait that separates the Albanian and Italian shores. Moretti decided to go there to interview survivors; in the scene included in *Aprile*, he points his finger at the leaders of the Italian left for not showing their faces, for being callous in the face of a humanitarian calamity. Without tracking back from this indignation, Moretti then adds, as an offhand remark to his close friend and collaborator Angelo Barbagallo (who also plays himself), that part of the problem is that 20 years prior those very same leaders were communist youth activists who in their spare time devoured the American TV sitcom *Happy Days* (Garry Marshall, 1974-1984). "What does that have to do with anything?," Barbagallo retorts. "Right, it doesn't," Moretti promptly concedes, the entire scene making plain the preposterous nature of the claim; but then he goes back. "It doesn't but it does, it doesn't but it does," Moretti reiterates, stubbornly, as if impervious to rational argument.

In an earlier scene (one I've already mentioned), the protagonist of *Aprile* leaves his apartment in frantic exasperation, after watching the 1996 pre-election debate on TV. He mutters to himself as he drives his car: "I need

[153] In chapter 4 (above), I have signalled how Moretti repeatedly does this in *Ecce bombo*; in chapter 6, I will look in detail at an even more complex instance of self-representation, in *The Caiman* (see especially the section titled "Three ways of staging Berlusconi").

to get into a fight! I just have to!" Suddenly, it dawns on him that his friend Daniele Luchetti is shooting a commercial that very evening, and that's the perfect outlet for his anger. He proceeds to pay him a visit, to pester Luchetti with negative views on TV commercials. Even if Luchetti is indeed a filmmaker who has on occasion shot TV ads, and even if the scene is played by the actual Luchetti, this is obviously staged: it is a dramatization, a form of role-playing. The self-satirical element is unmissable: Moretti tells Luchetti he should be making films instead of wasting his time on stupid commercials, and Luchetti, who is the younger of the two by almost ten years, points out he has made more movies than Moretti. Meanwhile, the views the protagonist of *Aprile* expresses in this scene are indeed the director's own. Commenting on the episode in an interview, Moretti makes the following, illuminating remark: "I am not just making fun of those who make commercials: most of all, I am making fun of my own intransigence towards commercials – an intransigence that in the meantime I myself uphold."[154] In another interview, around the same time, he adds: "As often happens in my films, it is mostly my own character I turn into ridicule ... It is my own attitude towards commercials I poke fun at. And yet such an attitude shall not change!"[155]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to shed light on *Palombella rossa* by a similar method to the one I followed earlier in relation to *Ecce bombo*. I have interpreted the film against its historical circumstances, and particularly in relation to its political moment. I have accounted for its stylistic features primarily in terms of art cinema narration – especially with the help of its particular understanding of "psychological realism" – but also signalling the

[154] "Je ne me moque pas seulement de ceux qui font de la publicité, mais surtout je me moque de ma rigidité vis-à-vis de la publicité, une rigidité que par ailleurs je revendique" (Gili 2017: 83).

[155] "Beaucoup de gens voient dans cette scène seulement une volonté de me moquer de la publicité. Mais comme cela arrive souvent dans mes films, c'est plutôt mon personnage que je tourne en dérision, davantage que Luchetti lui-même. C'est surtout de mon attitude envers la publicité dont je me moque. Et mon attitude ne changera d'ailleurs pas!" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 56).

film's nods to Brecht.[156] I also pointed out the elements in the film that speak to Moretti's biographical experience: just as in *Ecce bombo* Michele takes part in a consciousness-raising group that echoes the one Moretti actually belonged to, here Michele is a water polo player in the same way Moretti was for many years. Finally, I have discussed previous interpretative hypothesis by the light of our best guesses about what the director might have been trying to do, and for this I naturally examined Moretti's statements.

However, *Palombella rossa* also differs from earlier Moretti films in significant ways, and it may be a case where both the historical context and the director's extracinematic comments lead us in deceiving directions, orienting us all too straightforwardly towards a political reading.[157] I would not go so far as to claim that the film is not, in some sense, "about" the final crisis of 20th century Communism. And I do admit that the coincidence between the fictional protagonist's views, expressed in the story, and the filmmaker's own, as stated in interviews, must necessarily inform our assessment of the character. What I nonetheless believe is that the easiness with which one is able to tell what the film is about, and where Moretti stands in relation to Michele, can paradoxically constitute more of an obstacle than an aid; and the temptation to read the film in terms of absolute transparency must be resisted, for it is not easily borne out by many of the film's actual features

Against the supposed smoothness of its "theme" and "message", *Palombella rossa* raises its resoundingly strange head. Quite often we do not know what the characters are talking about: just consider the odd monologue the character played by Ruiz delivers, or the tirades of the strange duo of protesters, which become ever more nonsensical.[158] We cannot easily tell why

[156] On the notion of psychological realism embraced by art cinema, see chapter 4 (above), especially the section titled: "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody".
[157] This is Cruciani's view: she describes the political allegory in *Palombella rossa* as little more than a pretext for staging Michele's internal conflicts once again. "Il Pci è, insomma, un pretesto per mettere in scena conflitti e complessi psichici di Michele Apicella" (Cruciani 2013: kindle 8%).
[158] As I have pointed out earlier, Ruiz himself wrote – on the spot – the lines his character delivers in the film: "What does it mean to be a communist? A feeling of wholeness. But what is this wholeness? A sports ground, a swimming pool. All around there's the angels, the audience. The audience yells; and you, for your part, silence: goal!" In line with Cruciani, I am inclined to read this "feeling of wholeness" by the light of the "oceanic feeling" Freud discusses in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Cruciani 2013:

some characters crop up where and when they do: who is the Catholic activist, and what is he doing next to the water-polo match? And why did Valentina join her dad, if she spends most of her time in the vicinity of the pool doing school assignments? Even when we do understand who the characters are and what they are saying, we are often still hard pressed to determine *why* they are saying such things at a particular moment: consider Michele's diatribe against the "end of history" ideology, which he delivers in the middle of the game.

The strenuous effort some critics have made to force singular elements of *Palombella rossa* into a direct political mould have for the most part produced unconvincing results, for reasons I hope to have shown. Thus, after initial sections outlining the contextual referents of *Palombella rossa*, I then confront the challenges posed by the film's narrative structure, with the help of critics who have tried to explain *Palombella rossa*'s "dream-like" logic. Similarly, although the things Moretti says in interviews are sometimes very similar to ideas expressed by the protagonist in the story, I avoid directly equating the two; instead, I stay alert to the ways the protagonist resists being seen in an overly positive light, and pay attention to the hints in the film that invite us to cast a critical look on the protagonist's actions and statements. Therefore, if I begin the chapter by acknowledging the film's political and biographical referents, I am then led to dwell in detail on the strange logic of its narrative development, and on the paradoxical – nay, uncomfortable – features of Michele Apicella.[159]

Two major interpretative trends seem to have formed around *Palombella rossa*: the first has read the film by a political light, while the second has privileged a psychoanalytical lens. All along the chapter I engage with both readings, as I try myself to help unravel the film's many mysteries;

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kindle 10%). There seem to be intriguing parallels between Moretti's film and Freud's short, difficult book, but more research is needed to establish the relationship between the two. It's a challenging – but I suspect rewarding – task to be conducted.

[159] The film's narrative structure is examined in some detail in the sections titled: "A dream-like film" and "A spiralling structure"; the relationship we are invited to entertain with the fictional protagonist is considered in particular in the sections titled: "The way you speak", "Why are words important", and "The rhetorical strategy" (above).

and in this task I can only claim partial success. In the meantime, by looking critically at Michele Apicella in the context of his interactions with the other fictional persons that compose *Palombella rossa*, I have pushed forth in trying to understand how Moretti works with self-representation. This is an issue that will be at the centre of the next, and final, chapter: there, I will analyse a set of films where for the first time Moretti plays a character under his own name; and yet it is still in terms of self-fictionalization rather than documentary reliability that the character's actions and opinions must be interpreted.

Chapter 6: **Moretti plays Moretti (on *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*, and *The Caiman*)**

> Friends, not all my readers (if readers I have) know that, besides being a columnist, I am also a playwright. The other day a football fan asked me: "Are you an actor?" I had to correct him: "Author." Slight surprise: "Isn't it the same?" I explained there was a subtle difference. But the football fan did not buy my story.[1]
> (Nelson Rodrigues, *O Globo*, 2.12.1973)[2]

Introduction: Forget Brecht?

In this final chapter, I focus on those films where Moretti plays a fictional creature under his *actual* name, a fictionalized version of himself: *Dear Diary* (1993), *Aprile* (1998), and *The Caiman* (2006); I also make occasional observations on *The Son's Room* (2001), *We Have a Pope* (2011), and *Mia madre* (2015), the three other fictional films he directed this century. Two central issues occupy my interest here. Firstly, what is the status of Moretti's character when he plays himself: is it fictional, or nonfictional? Do the things we know about the actual filmmaker help us make sense of what he does and says in the films? Do these characters stand in a different relationship to the actual Moretti than Michele did, in the earlier works? Secondly: does the ostensible coincidence between the actor-director and the figure on the screen definitely put to rest Brechtianism as a relevant lens for understanding Moretti? What is left of the idea of creating an emotional distance between character and audience, given that these later protagonists are noticeably more likeable than Michele? It would be tempting – but perhaps facile – to infer that Moretti himself became more likeable as he aged, and indeed, in interviews, the director often suggests a direct connection between the

[1] "Amigos, nem todos os meus leitores (se é que tenho leitores) sabem que, além de ser cronista, sou um dramaturgo. Outro dia, um torcedor me perguntava: 'Você é ator?' Retifiquei: 'Autor.' Ligeira surpresa: 'Não é a mesma coisa?' Tive de explicar-lhe que havia uma sutil diferença. Mas o torcedor não acreditou."

[2] Nelson Rodrigues (1912-1980) is generally considered to be the most important Brazilian dramatist of the 20th century. Besides that, he was a prolific writer in many genres, including journalistic pieces of football commentary.

psychological features of his protagonists and his own. This would seem to imply Moretti ditched his earlier preoccupation with undermining verisimilitude, now embracing a transparent representation of himself.

Such an impression is reinforced by what seems to be a straightforwardly naturalistic approach in *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*. The long take gains more prominence, in the service of conveying actual duration and giving a feeling for the place. In terms of David Bordwell's category of "art cinema", objective realism gains primacy over both subjective realism and authorial expressiveness. Meanwhile, though, Moretti's diaristic films also include elements that are meant to counter verisimilitude in the story and naturalism in style, and these are present even when the tale that is conveyed is declaredly nonfictional (as happens in the third segment of *Dear Diary*, and at various points in *Aprile*). Conversely, in those films that recount almost entirely fictional tales – *The Son's Room*, *We Have a Pope*, and *Mia madre* – Moretti evinces a noticeable preoccupation to insert elements of actuality. What seems to be characteristic of his later work is thus the comingling of fictional and nonfictional elements.

Dear Diary, the film where Moretti first introduces a character under his own name, receives the bulk of my attention in the first half of the chapter. While the use of the first person suggests a blurring of the boundary that separates the narrator from the actual author, each of the three segments (or "chapters") which compose *Dear Diary* stands in a different relation to actuality. The third part of the film is avowedly nonfictional, but the second one is fictional, and the first one a blend, the retelling of make-believe episodes inspired by Moretti's real life, by his actual opinions and traits. This could be taken to suggest the actual Moretti is the protagonist of part 3, a fictional creature under his name the protagonist of part 2, and a fictional character with a strong autobiographical element that of part 1; in fact, distinctions are not so watertight, and perhaps the character we see through all episodes of *Dear Diary* – the fictional, the nonfictional, and the semifictional – is consistently the same. The striking naturalism of the initial

scenes of *Dear Diary*, combined with the diary title and the fact that for the first time Moretti appears "as himself", may be taken to imply we are being presented with the *actual* filmmaker, but this does not prevent the very first segment of the film from taking a gradual fanciful turn, depicting events of a fantastic nature, with no abrupt break. In the same spirit, the opening scene of *Aprile* combines documentary aspects (excerpts from the actual television newscast of the night Berlusconi first won a general election in Italy, to which Moretti and his mother react) with overtly outlandish elements, such as the oversize joint the protagonist smokes on the occasion. If Moretti's films from the 1990s were really diaristic – that is, nonfictional – these aspects would be discrepant, but whatever takes place in *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* is organized, and justified, by the idiosyncrasies of the narrator-protagonist, and Moretti's presence as "himself" does not in any way function as a guarantee that the narrated events match actual ones. Both films contain flagrant "antimimetic emblems" – as Peter J. Bailey calls similar ingredients in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*.[3]

In the second half of the chapter I concentrate on *The Caiman*. In this film, Moretti does something he had not done before: he inserts himself in the film as a *supporting* character, alongside two fictional people who also represent facets of his usual persona.[4] There are only partial precedents for this in his *oeuvre*: in *I Am An Autarkist* (1976), his *debut* feature, Moretti had already ascribed some of his own biographical traits to the fictional Fabio (Fabio Traversa). However, differently from what occurs in *The Caiman*, the interplay between Fabio and Michele in this earlier film did not seem to speak to the tension between different sides of Moretti's *persona*. Another partial precursor is the second segment of *Dear Diary*, in that the character of Gerardo (Renato Carpentieri) occupies such a central place in the story as to be almost its co-protagonist. However, the fictional Gerardo did not acquire

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[3] Bailey (2001: 37) cites for instance the "magical" presence of the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall*, which is similar to Jennifer Beals' sudden appearance in *Dear Diary*. See the section "A whimsical protagonist", below.

[4] Moretti would do this in *We Have A Pope* and *Mia madre* as well, the two fictional films he released after *The Caiman*. His public statements suggest he might not be playing the protagonist in his own films ever again.

Morettian traits; instead, he seemed to be a satirical portrait of *other* people. That the co-presence of various directorial surrogates in *The Caiman* allows the film to explore the relationship between different sides of Moretti becomes particularly obvious in the scene where Bruno, Teresa, and "Moretti" discuss the pertinence of making the very film we are watching.

The various directorial surrogates of *The Caiman* bring back the pertinence of Brecht's ideas. The idea that characters should be portrayed as internally fragmented, as self-contradictory, was a central one for the German playwright. Moreover, in *The Caiman*, this internal fragmentation affects not just the characters, but also the film's overall structure, at both the stylistic and the narrative levels. *The Caiman* juxtaposes strikingly divergent film styles through frequent jumps between different levels of diegetic reality, from events in the story to scenes that are retrospectively revealed to be excerpts of other films, most of which exist only in the fictional world of *The Caiman*. It is as if Moretti allowed his film to be pulled in different directions.

Overall, this chapter argues that, notwithstanding naturalistic appearances, Moretti is still very much preoccupied with filtering representation, including self-representation, through a Brechtian lens. Of course, showing that the German playwright is an important influence on the Italian filmmaker does not entail my acceptance of many of Brecht's claims, notably the idea that people can only be represented realistically through self-contradictory characters, or that empathy would have a numbing effect on audiences. What is more, I do not think Moretti accepts such assumptions in an uncritical manner either. Brecht's influence should not be conceived as the application of a hard and fast set of formal rules; instead, the German playwright's reflections stimulate and guide Moretti as he works through practical filmmaking problems. Most prominent amongst these is the question of finding the best way of addressing a political subject matter in film. This issue is overtly at the heart of both *Aprile* and *The Caiman*, two films where Brecht's influence is therefore particularly noticeable. The

answer to the rhetorical question that leads this introduction has to be resoundingly negative: at this later stage, Moretti remains engaged in a dialogue with the German playwright, even if this influence translates differently than it did in Moretti's earlier work.

An urge to give witness

Writing in the immediate aftermath of *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*, Guido Bonsaver was led to believe Moretti had developed "a new attitude towards the representation of reality" (2001-2002: 175), away from the surrealistic and fanciful aspects of the earlier work, towards a naturalistic approach, of which the use of his own name would be an emblem:

> [Moretti's] films of the 1990s have certainly revealed a new stylistic approach. The caricatured and surreal atmospheres of the early films have given way to a more direct, documentary style which puts the viewer in closer contact with reality. (2001-2002: 178)

For Bonsaver, the key to this transformation lay in Moretti's experience in making *La cosa*, at the close of the 1980s, a short film to which the Italian scholar ascribes a lasting impact on the director's filmmaking. From the standpoint of his previous oeuvre, that television documentary was indeed something of an anomaly:

> In stylistic terms, the documentary could not have been more different from anything Moretti had done before. The presence of the film-maker was almost totally removed, the whole documentary consisted of medium-shots of single party members expressing their thoughts. There were practically no camera movements at all, almost as if the camera had been left in a corner of a room as a totally unobtrusive witness. (Bonsaver 2001-2002: 169)

The director himself avows the influence of documentary elements on *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*. For both films, he draws upon short recordings of actual events, which he then either recreates or directly incorporates into the finished films. In fact, Moretti had already experimented with this method even before *La cosa*: for the fictional *Palombella rossa*, he used for inspiration

material he had recorded a couple years earlier, during his final season as a water polo player.[5] Dabbling in nonfictional filmmaking proved to be a fruitful creative resource for the fictional work; then, once *Palombella rossa* was out, the director embarked on his first explicit attempt in the documentary genre. By this point he was the producer of his own work, and therefore had immediate access to both camera and film, allowing him to make the snap decision to record the grassroots meetings of the PCI across various parts of Italy that we see in *La cosa*.

Both *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* benefited from the same creative and material freedom, and both were to a significant extent born out of an accumulation of fragments recorded on different occasions. “The first step to making *Dear Diary* was *not* to realize that I was beginning my next film,” the director says, referring to the fact that when the shooting began he had not consciously set out to make a feature.[6] In August 1992, almost on a whim, he decided to record some of his scooter rides across the deserted streets of Rome, with the idea of making a short to be screened alongside Alexander Rockwell’s *In the Soup* the following autumn, at Moretti’s own movie theatre, *Nuovo Sacher*.[7] The experience pleased him so much – he enjoyed the freedom to shoot in short bursts at a time – that he ended up deciding to make a feature-length picture in this manner, radicalizing the old idea of creating a film as a succession of shorts.[8] Here is Moretti:

> After those two weekends of shooting, I went into the screening room. When I saw the rushes, I said to Angelo [Barbagallo]: “I want to make an entire film like that, with that sort of *license*” – in a good way. Shooting those first few

[5] Moretti’s final season was 1986. 21 years later, the filmmaker would edit this material into the 15-minute documentary *L’ultimo campionato* (*The Last Championship*, 2007), which is included as an extra in the *Palombella rossa* DVD.

[6] “La première démarche, dans *Journal Intime*, était de ne pas me rendre compte que je commençais à tourner mon prochain film” (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 149).

[7] “Nous étions en août et j’étais resté à Rome, comme souvent. J’en profitais pour me balader en Vespa. Et j’ai eu l’idée de tourner un court métrage. Une fois de plus, j’ai profité du fait d’avoir une maison de production et une salle de cinéma et j’ai pensé qu’avant de montrer un long métrage pas trop long, je pourrais programmer au ‘Nuovo Sacher’ un court sur mes balades en Vespa. Partant de cette idée, j’ai tournée sur deux week-ends, en plein mois d’août” (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 143).

[8] This is an idea I’ve discussed in chapter 4, in the section titled “A Brechtian inflection”. “I have always thought of each sequence as a sort of short film” (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 48).

> segments, I had the impression of recovering the levity of the days of my little films in Super 8.[9]

Again for *Aprile* Moretti would begin as if he didn't mean to make a film.[10] "When Silvia [Nono, his then wife] was in the ninth month of her pregnancy, I began shooting things which are in *Aprile* … without quite knowing where that would lead."[11] The method is actually closer to writing a diary than had been the case in *Dear Diary*, for here Moretti draws on several independent recordings made over the course of three years. The shoot becomes an open-ended work-in-progress that makes room for the incorporation of actual events – in the personal and the public spheres – as they happen.[12]

The story of *Aprile* recounts its protagonist's indecisiveness about whether to make a documentary about Italy's current political situation or a fanciful musical; wavering between the two, he is ostensibly unable to bring either of the enterprises into fruition. But should we trust this to be a reliable account of what Moretti went through in those years? "Although the film seems to say the opposite, I think I have managed to show how I feel about this country and what has happened to it over the past few years, not through a documentary but through the staging of a documentary, as it were," the filmmaker clarifies.[13] Besides – possibly – expressing difficulties the filmmaker did in fact encounter in making his film, the protagonist's hesitations serve a rhetorical point. Moretti's manoeuvre brings to mind

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[9] "Après avoir tourné ces deux week-ends, je suis allé en projection. En voyant le résultat, j'ai dit à Angelo [Barbagallo]: 'Je voudrais faire un film entier comme ça: avec la même *irresponsabilité*' – dans le sens positif du terme. En tournant ces premiers segments, j'avais l'impression de retrouver la légèreté du temps de mes petits films en Super 8" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 144).

[10] "On n'avait l'impression de tourner un film" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 163).

[11] "Quand Silvia en était à son neuvième mois de grossesse, j'ai commencé à tourner des choses qui sont dans *Aprile* … sans savoir encore ce que cela allait donner" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 49).

[12] "[Je me suis laissé] surprendre par les évènements, en les intégrant au film. Par exemple, l'arrivée des Albanais dans les Pouilles. J'y suis allé avec une équipe réduite. Il en est de même pour la 'déclaration d'indépendance de la Padanie'" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 49). "C'était une sorte the '*work in progress*', une construction qui s'est faite au fil des choses. Le tournage et le montage ont été morcelés et répartis sur des périodes très longues" (*idem*: 54)

[13] "Contrairement à ce que le film semble raconter, je crois que je parviens à montrer mon sentiment vis-à-vis de ce pays et de ce qui est arrivé ces dernières années, non pas à travers un documentaire mais grâce à une espèce de mise en scène du documentaire" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 50).

Fernando Pessoa's modernist poem which I have quoted as an epigraph to this dissertation:

> The poet is a faker
> Who's so good at his act
> He even fakes the pain
> Of pain he feels in fact

Each Moretti film that has a filmmaker for protagonist – *Aprile*, *The Caiman*, *Mia madre*, but also the earlier *Sweet Dreams* (1981) – depicts a situation where the making of a picture is stalled, a motif which allows him to bring about interruptions and digressions, to the point of offering us films that as it were fail to reach an ending (*Aprile*, *The Caiman*). Rather than choosing between the documentary and the musical, what is crucial to *Aprile* is the weaving of the actual and the fictional, the serious and the extravagant. A similar concept had been constitutive of *Palombella rossa*, as I have shown in the previous chapter.[14]

Whereas some elements of *Aprile* are overtly fictional, in others actuality carries a crucial weight. We need not believe, for instance, that Moretti actually stop-started the shooting of a musical, or that under those circumstances he would have been too cowardly to inform the actors himself of his decision, sending his collaborators to give them the bad news instead – but, then again, who knows? We also don't need to believe that Moretti and his wife actually chose their child's name by knockout stages, as in a sports tournament. However, this game of pretence, this farcical exaggeration, crucially depends for its dramatic effect on our awareness that at its base are actual occurrences: that Silvio Orlando, the actor who plays the lead in the musical that exists only in the fictional realm of *Aprile*, is actually an actor who has previously collaborated with Moretti; and that the person who embodies the director's wife on the screen was his actual wife at the time, and that she was indeed pregnant. The characters in the story of *Aprile* not only bear – in every case – the names of the actual people who play the roles, but

[14] See in particular the section titled "A political film yearning to be a musical".

their features match their biographical selves to a fault.[15] The same goes for locations: "I had promised myself never again to shoot a film in my own apartment," the director says, "but, for a stupid question of *honesty* towards the spectator, and because this film is a diary, I felt I had to do it" (emphasis added).[16] Silvia Nono and Angelo Barbagallo play themselves in the film, even though neither of them are actors by trade.[17] Moretti's mother (Agata Apicella Moretti), his mother-in-law (Nuria Schönberg),[18] and his son Pietro also make cameo appearances – though the latter is so young he is most definitely not acting.

It is similarly crucial that we know that the protagonist of *Aprile* is reacting to actual political events, which are furthermore represented through the insertion of actual footage (either clips of television footage or recordings made by Moretti and his crew). There is an overt element of reportage in *Aprile*, an avowed desire to register and report on what is actually happening, as is evident from the scenes of the declaration of independence of the "Federal Republic of the Padania," or the interviews with survivors of the tragedy of Otranto.[19] Moretti goes to Brindisi to show us the

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[15] A recent film that is similar to Aprile in this respect is *The Rider* (Chloé Zhao, 2017). Despite the fact that the story it tells is mostly fictional, all the characters share their first names with the actors who embody them, and many of their features match aspects of the actors' actual selves; such actors are furthermore nonprofessionals. The overlap plays a decisive role in the film's dramatic effect, to the point that you wouldn't quite understand *The Rider* if you were oblivious to it. As Murray Smith writes, "The hunch we have as we watch the film that many cast members might be playing fictional versions of themselves is consolidated by the closing credits … Far from collapsing character into actor … however, this strategy invites us to consider the extent to which, and the ways in which, the characters are *not* quite identical to the people portraying them" (Smith 2019: xiii – emphasis added).

[16] "Je m'étais promis de ne plus jamais tourner chez moi, mais une fois encore je suis tombé dans le piège. Pour une question stupide d'honnêteté vis-à-vis du spectateur, j'ai quand même voulu tourner – puis qu'il s'agit d'un journal – dans mon appartement. Il n'y avait pas de scénario, j'avais juste pris quelques notes. Mais aucune scène n'est improvisée durant les prises" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 49).

[17] "Je m'étais demandé s'il fallait confier à un acteur le rôle de l'assistant, qui est important sur ce film. Mais cela m'aurait semblé faux. L'assistant est donc mon vrai assistant et Barbagallo – mon associé – joue son propre rôle. De même, Silvia n'est pas actrice dans la vie" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 50).

[18] Nuria Schönberg (*b.* 1932) is the daughter of one of the most influential music theorists and composers of the 20th century, Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951). Nuria's husband (Silvia's father) was the Italian avant-garde composer Luigi Nono (1924-1990), a preeminent name in classical music in his own right. Nono also took part in the Italian resistance, and was a life-long member of the Communist Party.

[19] "Padania" is the name the secessionists gave to the Po Valley region, in northern Italy, one of the richest in the country. The eminently symbolic proclamation of independence took place in Venice, on September 15th, 1996. It was a propaganda gesture by the leader of the separatist party Northern League, Umberto Bossi (*b.* 1941). Bossi was at the head of the League for more than two decades, and in that capacity would twice serve as minister under Berlusconi (in 2001-2004 and 2008-2011).

men, women, and children who were on the Albanian boat that sank, because he thinks it is important to bear witness.[20]

Such desire is a classical feature of the documentary as a genre. As Plantinga puts it, documentaries don't merely say something about the actual world, but also, typically, show it:

> When a filmmaker presents a film as a documentary, he or she not only intends that the audience come to certain beliefs, but also implicitly asserts something about the use of the medium itself – that the use of motion pictures and recorded sounds offer an audiovisual array that communicates some phenomenological aspect of the subject, from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to form a sense of that phenomenological aspect and/or form true beliefs about the subject. … Images and sounds are used not solely to assert, but to provide a sense of the look, sound, or overall perceptual experience of a scene. (2005: 111-113)

While Moretti's earlier work was similarly peppered with references to current events, the nature of such allusions was markedly different. In chapter 4, I have mentioned how Moretti includes a sequence of newspaper headlines in *Ecce bombo*, which served to date the film (to dismantle, in Brechtian fashion, the purported integrity of the story-world), but did not evince a straightforward impulse to register what was happening in the world, as would be the case in *Aprile* (or, more recently, in *Santiago, Italy* [2018]).[21] In fact, both *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* include winks at the Brechtian penchant for inserting fragments of current newspapers in fictional works, but the purpose of these seems to be to *subvert* Brechtian doctrine. In *Dear Diary* ("Chapter Two: Islands"), the protagonist works – or rather plans to work – on the script of his next film by going through bits of old newspapers, but he accomplishes nothing; in *Aprile*, as he rides his scooter, he ritualistically ditches clippings he had been collecting for the previous two decades, "for no other reason than they made me mad." Getting rid of this useless baggage allows the fictional protagonist to move on: in the next (and

[20] "Si je montre la déclaration d'Indépendance de la Padanie, ou l'arrivée d'un bateau en provenance d'Albanie, c'est parce que je veux *être là*, pas seulement pour montrer mais aussi pour voir, moi-même…" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 54).

[21] See in particular the section titled "A Brechtian inflection" in chapter 4.

final) scene of *Aprile* he actually starts shooting the musical he had long been hoping to make.

As noted above, Bonsaver correctly observes that the documentarian impulse of *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* translates into significant stylistic features. The editing now abides by principles of realistic depiction, with long takes meant to communicate real time and a sense of the actual location, rather than flaunting authorial expressiveness, as used to be the case at an earlier stage.[22] In *Ecce Bombo*, for instance,

> Scenes were sometimes cut before characters had finished delivering a gesture or a line. These unexpected cuts added force to both the farcical behaviour of the characters and to the jerky, intolerant personality of the protagonist. (Bonsaver 2001-2002: 174)

Now, instead, Bonsaver notices "a predilection for uninterrupted takes," of which the segment in homage to Pasolini in *Dear Diary* (which I will discuss in some detail) is perhaps the most flagrant instance. "[It] made some critics suggest a conversion of Moretti to Rossellini's ideas of cinematic realism" (Bonsaver 2001-2002: 176). At points, an interest in *showing* leads Moretti to suppress authorial commentary altogether.[23] In a striking sequence in *Dear Diary*, we are presented with a succession of buildings, as in voice-over Moretti offers no more than their names and dates; after a while, he stops giving even this basic information, as if the sight of the buildings was so visually arresting it spoke for itself. But a bit of overt narration inserts itself to ironically undermine this absolute predominance of what is being shown: "A film made just of houses – panning shots of houses. How wonderful that would be!", Moretti declares in voice-over – the irony being that, in a way, that is precisely the kind of film he is offering us.[24]

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[22] On "objective realism" as a central motivating principle of art cinema narration, see chapter 4, particularly the section titled "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody".

[23] "Sometimes Moretti does not even add the comments of the protagonist … The protagonist watches in silence and the attention of the audience is therefore even more guided towards the documentary footage" (Bonsaver 2001-2001: 176-177).

[24] The sequence is echoed in an early scene of *The Son's Room* where Giovanni drives his car with his teenage son sitting next to him. Giovanni comments on the architecture of a particular neighbourhood, and this is followed by a tracking shot of buildings that is similar to that of *Dear Diary*, even if of much shorter duration.

According to the director's testimony, *Aprile* was at first actually conceived as a straightforward documentary. In the lead-up to the 1996 general election, Moretti shot many hours of political rallies, with the intention of making a film that – in his own words – would "stylistically resemble *La cosa*."[25] However, deciding the material wasn't that interesting, he eventually changed tack, and the film he ended up making is, in the director's own expression, "the staging of a documentary," rather than a documentary as such. Similarly, *The Caiman* is the result of a new attempt at making a documentary about the Italian political situation, when for the second time Berlusconi won a general election (in 2001); this time, the initial intention eventually morphed into a fictionalized account of the actual struggle the director went through in trying to make a film about Berlusconi. Moretti's two attempts at making a nonfictional film about the Italian political situation therefore resulted in films that deal with their political subjects – but they do so in an oblique manner, not a realistic one.

What is characteristic of Moretti's later films – even the overtly fictional ones – is the weaving of fictional and nonfictional elements, and particularly with details taken from the director's actual life. Even in *The Son's Room*, a film which has an outright fictional and conventionally dramatic situation at its core, Moretti signals his personal affinities with the protagonist by giving him his own name (Giovanni), and ascribing to the protagonist's daughter, Irene (Jasmine Trinca), traits that link her not only to earlier Moretti protagonists but to the director himself.[26] The story of *We Have A Pope* echoes a relatively recent news topic (the death of a Pope and his replacement by an old cardinal, in 2005), and strengthens this allusion by

[25] "Cette fois je voulais tourner un journal filmé et aussi faire un documentaire exclusivement sur la campagne électorale, stylistiquement proche de *La Chose*, d'autant que j'avais filmé et accumulé des heures et des heures de meetings de cette campagne électorale … Puis … je vois une partie de toutes ces heures et je me rends compte que ça ne m'intéresse pas de les monter" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 163-164).

[26] Irene is quite competitive in sports, a trait she shares not just with Michele Apicella but with the actual Moretti (see Joyard and Larcher 2001: 22-23; Codelli 2001: 11). As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, a sequence depicting Irene being sent off at a basketball game is a sort of condensed replay of several scenes involving Michele Apicella in *Palombella rossa*. The way Irene learns about her brother's death is avowedly based on Moretti's own experience: he was practising water polo when his father and brother came to inform him of his grandfather's passing (Joyard and Larcher 2001: 22).

including actual stock footage from John Paul II's funerals, but then goes on to explore the situation in an entirely fictional, even fantastical vein. "I didn't want to be constrained by current events," the director declared on the occasion. "People expected me to speak about the paedophilia scandals, or about the financial crimes within the Vatican, but I wasn't interested in any of that."[27] In the more recent *Mia Madre*, a few objects that belong to the fictional mother (Ada, played Giulia Lazzarini) in the story – an eyeglass case, a small agenda, a handbag, some clothes – actually belonged to the director's own, recently deceased mother, as Moretti points out in an interview. The same goes for the piece of paper where the fictional old woman jots down the list of medicines she needs to take: this was Moretti's mother's own, the actual thing.[28] Some dialogues in the film directly draw on conversations Moretti had with his mother during her final illness, as he recounts in an interview:

> After I finished the first version of the script, there was a difficult moment for me, when I finally decided to re-read the diary I had kept during my mother's illness. That was a task I kept putting off. It wasn't easy to plunge back into those weeks, those states of mind, but I did find a few dialogues I had had with my mother which I ended up including in the script.[29]

At the same time, even the diaristic films take good care to include features that counter verisimilitude, by undercutting both the realism of the story (with outlandish elements) and the naturalism of style. The director himself describes *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* (along with *Palombella rossa*) as expressing a *less* realistic form of storytelling than his previous work, a

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[27] "Je ne voulais pas être conditionné par l'actualité … Le public s'attendait – c'est ce qu'il voulait – qu'il soit question des scandales de la pédophilie, des scandales financiers à l'intérieur du Vatican, mais cela ne m'intéressait pas" (Gili 2017: 124).

[28] "Certains objets présents à l'écran, je les ai apportés de la réalité. En plus des livres de leur bibliothèque – mon père enseignait l'épigraphie grecque à l'université, ma mère le latin dans un lycée – ont aussi appartenu à ma mère certains pull-overs que porte Giulia Lazzarini, un étui à lunettes, un petit agenda, un sac à main …. Même l'automobile que conduit Margherita est ma propre voiture dans la réalité" (Gili 2017: 134). "Vers la fin, lorsqu'elle lit la feuille avec les médicaments qu'elle doit prendre, il s'agit réellement de celle que ma mère avait préparée dans les dernières semaines de sa vie, pour savoir quels médicaments prendre et quand" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 9).

[29] "Pendant l'écriture, il y a eu un moment douloureux quand, après avoir terminé la première version du scénario, je me suis résolu à relire – c'est une chose que je renvoyais sans cesse – le journal intime que je tenais pendant la maladie de ma mère. Cela n'a pas été facile de replonger dans ces semaines, dans ces états d'âme, mais j'ai retrouvé dans mon journal quelques phrases échangées entre ma mère et moi que j'ai insérées dans le scénario" (Gili 2017: 130).

remark that may be counterintuitive but is not patently false.[30] I think what he means is that these films are not concerned with creating a plausible, self-enclosed, life-like narrative world.[31] Furthermore, when asked whether *Dear Diary* might augur a return to direct cinema, Moretti demurs: "I'm not sure, I don't think so. In the first half hour there is a guy, almost always seen from the back, who wanders around on a Vespa."[32]

Bonsaver claims that the use Moretti makes of voice-over narration in *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* conveys the author's presence in a classical documentary mould.[33] However, Moretti also includes in these films a less orthodox kind of authorial narration, one that undercuts realistic representation: in several scenes, the protagonist comments *retrospectively* on events as they are ostensibly happening. In interviews, Moretti dubs this device a "voice-over in", "an off-screen on-screen" (Gili 2017: 61), hinting at the fact that his character seems both to be part of the scene and to comment on it from an external standpoint. On these occasions, the protagonist becomes literally an "in-between figure" who stands "between the staged numbers and the audience" (Sayad 2013: 109).[34] The effect is furthermore clearly Brechtian, in keeping with the German playwright's idea of "literarizing" the theatre by "punctuating 'representation' with 'formulation'" (Brecht 1964: 43). "Brecht seeks to install an overt narration at the center of the theatrical experience," writes Bordwell, "mediating between the imaginary fabula world and its presentation on stage" (1985: 270-271). That is exactly what Moretti's "off-screen on-screen" does.

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[30] I have quoted Moretti's remark in full in the introduction to the previous chapter: "Ainsi a commencé la période durant laquelle je sentais le besoin de raconter sur un mode moins réaliste, mais plus personnel, plus libre: *Palombella rossa, Journal intime, Aprile*" (Delorme and Morreale 2015: 14).

[31] This is consistent with Sayad's reading as well: she cites Moretti's protagonists in his diaristic films as examples of characters who refuse to be fully absorbed by the diegetical universe they ostensibly belong to (Sayad 2013: 138-139). See my discussion of her ideas in a section titled "Disrupting the diegesis", in chapter 3, above.

[32] "*Q:* Journal Intime *préfigure le retour du cinéma direct, avec le numérique?* A: Je ne saurais dire, je ne crois pas. Au cours de la première demi-heure, il y a un type, quasiment toujours vu de dos qui se promène en Vespa" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 150).

[33] "[Moretti's] voice-over acts in a very similar fashion to that of the authorial voice in a documentary" (Bonsaver 2001-2001: 178).

[34] The idea of an in-between figure is one Sayad borrows from Bakhtin's concept of the fool. I have addressed it in chapter 3, above, particularly in the section titled "Disrupting the diegesis".

Principles of realism – of both a subjective and an objective kind – continue to play an important part in Moretti's later films; but so do Brechtian ideas (with the salient exception of *The Son's Room*). In order to counter linear narratives that move towards a cathartic finale, Moretti works with loose and open-ended structures, most obviously in *Aprile*. Even in the more straightforward narrative fictions of *We Have A Pope* and *Mia madre*, there is a noticeable preoccupation to introduce loose ends (issues that are raised and never picked up on), as well as those musical moments that have become a sort of trademark of the director; as it is, the straightforwardly documentary *Santiago, Italy* too closes off with a staged musical number, in what amounts to an authorial signature. In practically every one of his feature films, Moretti includes bits of discordant film textures, thus shattering the purported coherence of the narrative world of the film, an effect that is pursued most radically in *The Caiman*. Watching the diaristic films by the light of Moretti's later work helps us notice the ways in which *Dear Diary* and *Aprile* still carry traces of a Brechtian influence.

Brecht's idea that the actor should not fuse with the character is explicitly articulated in *Mia madre*, as I have noted in chapter 4.[35] Similarly, when Moretti plays a character bearing his own name (in *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*, or *The Caiman*) we should not assume that it is the actual Moretti we are watching; rather, it is *also* the actual Moretti. The concept gets a clear illustration in *The Caiman*, in a scene where three different characters interact and disagree about the pertinence of making a film similar to the one we are watching. In the story, the fictional Bruno (Silvio Orlando) and Teresa (Jasmine Trinca) are trying to set up a film about Berlusconi, and they want Moretti to play the lead. The director is present in the scene, playing himself. There is extracinematic confirmation that the things he says are ones the director himself does think: "I reject Bruno's and Teresa's proposal in a rather smug manner, but the things I say are ones that I, to a great extent, do believe in," Moretti declares in an interview. "Meanwhile, to say them in such

[35] See the section titled "Actors versus characters".

a manner is of course a way of poking fun at my own arrogance."[36] If the misgivings the character expresses about the idea of a film on Berlusconi are the filmmaker's own, this can obviously not be the whole story – for, after all, Moretti did make a picture about the Italian magnate, which is just the one we are watching. I will return to the analysis of this scene, and of the role Moretti plays in *The Caiman*, in more detail towards the end of the present chapter. For now I will look closely at *Dear Diary*.

Moretti: the actual and the fictional

If we were to take the initial images of *Dear Diary* literally, everything we are then shown would stem directly from Moretti's pen. The writing metaphor is strongly underscored: the opening credits are in the director's handwriting, the film's three segments are called "chapters", and the introductory images are a close-up on Moretti's hand as he writes: "Dear Diary, there's something I enjoy more than anything else." The film is therefore presented as a set of ad hoc observations from the narrator, spending no time setting-up a character or a narrative situation. As Bailey points out (2001: 59) in reference to the opening soliloquy of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, the lack of an explicit identification of the character "tends to blur the boundary separating protagonist from screenwriter." The beginning implies the film to be, as it were, a page torn out of the director's life.

In spite of its name, however, *Dear Diary* is not literally a diary: not the actual recording of live events, but a subsequent reconstruction which includes a degree of poetic license. The scooter rides we see in the film, for instance, were almost entirely re-staged a year after the initial film shoot (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 146). The relationship between each of its parts and actuality differs in the three cases. Chapter One, simply titled "On the Vespa", is fictionalized, even if it draws on autobiographical experience. It has no particular narrative or thematic unity: Moretti rides his scooter through

[36] "Je refusais avec une grande suffisance la proposition de Bruno et Teresa, disant des choses auxquelles en grande partie je crois, même si évidemment les jouer de cette manière revenait à me moquer de ma propre arrogance" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 222-223).

various neighbourhoods of Rome, in the summer, commenting on what he sees and bumping into people. The diary motif gives him the liberty to include whatever he sees fit: in his flânerie, topics are raised and then dropped, transitions are made with no obvious coherence. "I have not hesitated to switch abruptly in tone, style, and feeling from a scene to the next," the filmmaker says.[37]

The situations we witness in "On My Vespa" are clearly scripted, the short dialogues between Moretti and passers-by visibly staged, filmed from multiple angles, and other people's reactions do not agree with what one would expect from people who were to find themselves randomly approached on the street by a fairly famous filmmaker with his crew. The protagonist's own, somewhat extravagant, behaviour reinforces the impression that what is on display is a staged performance. While other people (the American actress Jennifer Beals; film director Alexandre Rockwell; Moretti's then wife, Silvia Nono; his long-time collaborator Angelo Barbagallo) make cameo appearances as themselves, the protagonist of *Dear Diary* combines biographical traits of Moretti that are widely known to his audience with quirks that are typical of the characters he previously incarnated, inheriting for instance Michele Apicella's long-standing obsession with shoes. The same trait is present in the semi-fictional protagonist of Moretti's next film, *Aprile* – and also in Giovanni, the protagonist of the more straightforwardly fictional *The Son's Room*.

Whereas in Chapter One all characters play under their actual names, in Chapter Two: "Islands" Moretti acts alongside the fictional Gerardo. The narrative set-up has Moretti travelling to the Aeolian Islands to stay with his friend, enjoy the quiet, and do some work. Finding Lipari, where Gerardo lives, too noisy at this time of the year, the two of them travel successively to Salina, Stromboli, Panarea, and finally Alicudi; in the end, Moretti hardly manages to get anything done. While the character keeps some features of

[37] "Pour avoir gardé un peu de la désinvolture avec laquelle j'avais tourné l'été précédent, je n'ai pas hésité à changer si brusquement de ton, de style, de sentiment d'une scène à l'autre" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 147).

Moretti's biographical self (he is a filmmaker, writing his next film and working from newspaper clippings), they are not as pronounced as in the previous episode, and there is little reference to actuality, so that the fictional tale is mostly coherent and self-enclosed. "Islands" is a succession of short, satirical fables in which each island embodies a particular kind of dystopia. Moretti says the idea for the film came to him on a plane, as he looked at the Aeolian islands from above: he thought each of them could stand for the "obsessive infatuation with an idea, a form of absolutism, a mania."[38] At one point he considered calling the whole film "Islands", or "From one island to the next", in that the various neighbourhoods of Rome (in Chapter One) are quite insular, as are medical doctors with their independent specialties and practices (in Chapter Three) (Gili 2017: 65). However – we must remind ourselves – this was not the title Moretti actually ended up choosing, and, by finally deciding to underscore the diaristic aspect, it was to the first-person nature of the narration the director chose to call attention to.

By contrast with the overtly fictional Chapter Two, the third and final segment of *Dear Diary* (Chapter Three: "Doctors") tells the nonfictional tale of how Moretti survived Hodgkin's lymphoma, a rare type of cancer. "Nothing in this chapter is invented," the narrator asserts at the very beginning. The promise of referential reliability gets extracinematic confirmation in interviews: "It bothers me to call it a script, because the chapter on doctors is not a script, it is a chronicle."[39] And, on another occasion: "I made it a point that the dialogues with the doctors were those I had actually had with them."[40] Intending a film to be taken nonfictionally is what philosophers like Jerrold Levinson or Gregory Currie call a "categorial" intention. Differently from the "semantic" kind, categorial intentions are authoritative and

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[38] "Alla fine del 1989, quando Moretti è in giro per l'Italia a filmare le assemblee nelle sezioni del PCI per il documentario *La cosa*, in volo verso Messina vede dall'alto tutte le isole Eolie. … S'immagina che ogni isola porti in sé l'esasperazione di un'idea, una forma di assolutismo, una fissazione" (Villa 2007: 28-29).

[39] "Cela me dérange d'appeler cela un scénario parce que ce chapitre des médecins n'est pas un scénario mais une chronique" (Gili 2017: 60.

[40] "Je tenais à ce que les dialogues avec les médecins dans ce chapitre soient ceux que j'avais eus avec les vrais médecins. Je ne voulais rien ajouter à ce qui s'était passé" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 144-145).

"virtually cannot fail", for without grasping them one would have no way of even starting to make sense of the artwork. Currie explains:

> There can hardly be a more important question about a piece of writing or speech than this: Is it fiction or nonfiction? If the question seems not especially important, that's because we rarely need to ask it. Most often we know, in advance of reading or hearing, that the discourse before us is one or the other. But imagine we did not know whether *The Origin of Species* is sober science or Borgesian fantasy on a grand scale. We would not know whether, or in what proportions, to be instructed or delighted by it. No coherent reading of it would be possible. (1990: 1)

For the most part, however, Chapter Three of *Dear Diary* relies not on actual footage of the depicted events, but rather on reconstructions; and while Moretti and some other agents with very minor roles (such as Nono and Barbagallo) play themselves, the doctors' roles are performed by actors. More importantly, not all the details of the staging are to be taken at face value. In more than one scene, the protagonist narrates the events in the presence of others who behave as if they could not see or hear him – in the "off-screen on-screen" that I have alluded to earlier – but naturally we are not to believe this is how things transpired in actuality. In an interview with the filmmaker, two critics suggest this device would be a way of breaking up the fiction from the inside, and the director seems to assent;[41] however, the observation is imprecise, for, in both *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*, this occurs not in fictional, but rather non-fictional, segments. What the device undermines is rather the *naturalism* of the narration. Pedro Poyato Sánchez concurs in reading an effect of denaturalization here, in that the present intrudes in the narrated past: "The text" – he writes, referring to the film – "time and again indicates that the images we see are not a record of what actually transpired, but rather a reconstruction, with the sole exception of the chemotherapy session."[42] Meanwhile, this stylistic choice does not detract from the

[41] "*Q: C'est une manière de rompre avec la fiction, tout en restant à l'intérieur de celle-ci.* A: Oui, ça me plaisait" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 150).

[42] "El texto da cuenta así una y otra vez de que las imágenes que vemos no son el resultado de los registros de los hechos realmente vividos, sino que obedecen a una reconstrucción de los mismos (se exceptúa la escena de la sesión de quimioterapia)" (Sánchez 2013: 29).

documentary character of the scenes, in that it does not undercut the chapter's fundamental claim to be a veridical representation. As Carl Plantinga notes, in the "expositional" documentary (as opposed to the "observational" type), there is some leeway for the inclusion of elements that do not neatly match the events being depicted, "as long as such images and sounds are not fundamentally misleading."[43] Chapter Three of *Dear Diary* is a humorous and mostly unsentimental re-enactment of the process by which it took Moretti a full year, many medical appointments, and many useless medicines to get a correct diagnosis.

It would be wrong to conceive of *Dear Diary* as the mere juxtaposition of three independent short films. In the very decision to combine a semi-autobiographical story, a completely made-up one, and a true tale resides the project's unity: it is a diary of sorts, if we admit that the form allows for the inclusion of fictional elements. This suggests Moretti sees distinctions between fiction and nonfiction not as a stark, black-and-white contrast, but as a gradation in shades. The ambiguous manner in which he refers in interviews to the protagonist of Chapter One – "a guy, almost always seen from the back, who wanders around on a Vespa" – evinces the director's effort to sidestep the question of whether said "guy" is or isn't himself; in the same spirit, Moretti points out that the character's name is never actually uttered in the film.[44] Nonetheless, he plainly declares what part of *Dear Diary* is to be taken nonfictionally, thus showing that the distinction does matter to him. Furthermore, it was – by Moretti's own account – the veracity of Chapter Three that constrained him to ditch the fictional alter ego under which he had performed in previous films. "I was absolutely determined to play my own character [in that chapter], not to hide myself beneath a fiction, and it seemed only natural that I should play in the first person in the other

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[43] "What is accepted as a veridical representation depends in part on the *mode* of documentary in question … In expositional documentaries, … the implicit rules for veridical representation through images are relaxed somewhat … as long as such images and sounds are not fundamentally misleading" (Plantinga 2005: 112 – emphasis in the original).

[44] "Je ne pense pas qu'on entend mon nom, à aucun moment du film" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 148).

chapters too."[45] Therefore, the documentary reliability that is at the heart of Chapter Three has consequences that resonate across the work as a whole.

In *Aprile*, released five years after *Dear Diary*, again the director draws on events from his actual life, not to create a fully-fledged fictional universe, but rather little dramatizations, in the form of make-believe. Although this time Moretti is not shy that his name – "Nanni" – be said out loud, the status of the scenes we watch is best understood as fictionalized, as was the case with Chapter One of *Dear Diary*.

Aprile covers roughly three years in Moretti's life, from the day of Berlusconi's first electoral victory, in March 1994, to the director's own birthday party in August 1997. In the story, the protagonist struggles to make a documentary about Italy's political moment, with the professed purpose to inform people in other countries about what is going on. However, he is plagued by doubts. As if he were a character in a Brechtian play, switching position in the middle of a scene and saying discordant things so as to express his internal contradictions, the protagonist of *Aprile* questions his own convictions immediately after he voices them:

> In this documentary I want to say what I think – without, however, provoking right-wing viewers, for that is not my point. I have no wish to convince them, either – I don't want to convince anyone. But I also don't want to pander to the left. I want to say what I think. But how do you do that in a documentary? And, more importantly: what is it that I think?

In the story, the protagonist is torn between recording actual political events, something he feels to be his "duty," and the idea of shooting a musical film about a Trotskyite pastry-cook. The latter project is escapist in both genre and thematic content, for in the tale the hero manages to lead a contented life only by ignoring what goes on in the world. He is a kind of an autarkist, a republic of one:

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[45] "*Q: Dans* Journal Intime*, vous abandonnez Michele Apicella pour passer à la première personne.* A: Tout découle de ma maladie et du chapitre sur les médecins, et je voulais impérativement jouer mon propre personnage, non pas me cacher derrière une fiction. À partir de là, il était normal que je joue à la première personne dans les autres chapitres" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 148).

> It is the 1950s. On the Left, everyone is with Stalin. But there is this one Trotskyite pastry cook, isolated and defamed, who, alone in his shop, amongst his cakes, is happy. He forgets about everything else, and he dances.

This individualist utopia includes a few self-referential winks: for starters, it is certainly not by chance that the fictional chef specializes in pastries, given Moretti's legendary fondness for sweets; he is, furthermore, a Trotskyite, as the filmmaker himself was in his late teenage years; and, despite his socialist leanings, the baker is only content doing his own thing, in an emphatically individualist endeavour much like Moretti's.

The surreal figure of the pastry cook had first been mentioned in Chapter One of *Dear Diary*: as Moretti wandered around Rome on his scooter, he had concocted a plan to see the inside of an apartment that he liked by telling the tenant he was location scouting for a musical about "a Trotskyite pastry cook in the conformist Italy of the 1950s." In the context of *Dear Diary* the remark had no further development, coming across as an eccentric, comical excuse to get inside strangers' houses; in *Aprile*, however, it has more thematic significance. Very early on in the later film, Moretti surprises his collaborators and actors by abandoning the project of the musical on the first day of shooting. The would-be lead actor of this pretend film, Silvio Orlando (played by himself), reacts with indignation, saying it has been nine years since Moretti started talking to him about the project. In actuality, the first film collaboration between Moretti and Orlando happened exactly nine years prior, in *Palombella rossa*; even if there is no indication that Moretti ever really intended to shoot an entire musical, the nod at the earlier work does not seem fortuitous. Moreover, the one scene of the musical that Nanni will eventually shoot – at the close of *Aprile* – is strongly reminiscent of the early scene of *Palombella rossa* where water polo players swam amidst colourful ads for pastries.[46]

[46] See my discussion of that scene in the previous chapter, towards the end of the section titled "A political film yearning to be a musical".

Like *Palombella rossa* – the story of a water polo player who was also a communist politician – *Aprile* deliberately mixes-up two disparate levels, although in the later film the effect is more straightforwardly comical, whereas the earlier work was predominantly absurdist. In *Aprile*, as his wife is in labour, Nanni goes through the maternity hospital's corridors trying to put up posters on the walls, to let people know about the wonders of the epidural; he calls these his "*dazibao*," after the large, handwritten posters which in China were used to convey political propaganda, particularly during Mao's "Cultural Revolution". Later on, Nanni celebrates the birth of his son amongst the revellers who commemorate the Left's electoral victory on the streets. He trumpets his newborn's weight ("9.2 pounds!"), as if it was an electoral score – as if he entertained the narcissistic fantasy that it was his personal event, too, that the crowds were celebrating. In *Palombella rossa*, people from the protagonist's political life converged to the swimming pool where the protagonist was taking part in a water polo game; in *Aprile*, Nanni's collaborators flock to the maternity hospital. When they try to get him to focus on the documentary, he constantly interrupts them with irrelevant observations about his newborn: his mind, like Michele's, is all over the place. In *Palombella rossa*, Moretti's had already tried to make a political film with the dreamlike quality of a musical; *Aprile* can be read as a later realization of that same concept.

A first-person political outlook

One of the remarkable features of the opening credits of *Dear Diary* is the silence: the image track is not accompanied by music, only by some very light ambient noise, but even here no particular sound is clearly identifiable. The effect is starkly naturalistic. The silence goes on as Chapter One begins, interrupted only by the vibration of Moretti's pen scratching paper. Cut to a shot of Moretti outside, shown from the back, riding his scooter, slightly wavering right and left through the shaded, empty roads of Rome, leisurely enjoying the ride; Angélique Kidjo's intensely rhythmic song "Batonga" now

plays on the soundtrack. Visually, this is an immediate representation of what the entire chapter will be about. Moretti is going for a stroll with no particular goal in sight: no thesis to deliver, no bill of tasks to fill, no concrete story to tell, no morality to impart – nothing to convey other than the ride itself. There is an essayistic spirit to Moretti's diary, one that brings to mind Sarah Bakewell's description of the Montaignean project: "In place of abstract answers, Montaigne tells us what *he* did in each case, and what it felt like when he was doing it" (2010: 5). The mobile camera adds to the sense of creative freedom that characterizes the chapter in both narrative form and thematic content. Moretti himself points out the stylistic contrast with his earlier films: "Until *The Mass Is Ended*, I would very rarely move the camera, whereas in 'On the Vespa' it is in constant motion."[47]

The structure of the film very closely matches the art film type in one of its possibilities:

> In this mode of narration, scenes are built around chance encounters, and the entire film may consist of nothing more than a series of them, linked by a trip … or aimless wanderings … The art film can thus become episodic, akin to picaresque and processional forms … (Bordwell 1985: 206)

Moretti roams through deserted streets, with no cars or people, the camera following him. He finally speaks in voice-over, 3'40 into the film, to point out that in the summer, in Rome, even movie theatres are closed, except for those screening porn, or the odd rerun. Slowly, with a deliberate cadence, he recites a list of titles: *Sex, Love, and Shepherding*; *Bestial Desires*; *Snow White and the Seven Blacks*; *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. The observation seems random, but there is a biting irony beneath it: the last item on the list is not a porn movie, but a horror crime film which earned a positive critical reception at the time, and a bit of a cult following.[48] To include it on the list is to take yet another indirect jab at movie critics, in the

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[47] "Jusqu'à *La messe est finie*, je bougeais très rarement la caméra, au contraire du chapitre 'En vespa' où elle est continuellement en mouvement" (Gili 2017: 62).

[48] *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986) had a very limited initial release, and a wider, later re-release, first in the US (in 1990) and then internationally, in art cinema circuits across the world. Moretti saw it at the 1991 Locarno Film Festival, where he was a member of the jury (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 146).

same spirit of Michele's sarcastic observations in *I Am An Autarkist*: "Why would critics recommend such films? … Could it be that they really like them?" In *Dear Diary*, the quiet, cadenced tone of Moretti's delivery furthermore contrasts with the purportedly obscene nature of the titles he recites (with gusto), resulting in his usual brand of deadpan humour. The titles themselves are comical for their pastiche and kitsch, almost as implausible as the (fictitious) movie titles to be mentioned in Moretti's later *The Caiman*, whose fictional protagonist is a film producer who owes his claim to fame to an assortment of B-movies, such as *Suzy the Misogynist*, *Male Chauvinists vs. Freud*, and (once again the obsession with shoes) *Lady Cop in Stilettos*, *Smutty Boots*, and *Murderous Loafers*.

To those familiar with Moretti's work, it is immediately clear we are in Morettian territory. In the written sentence that opens it, *Dear Diary* is offered as an exploration of the narrator's personal preferences, with no need for any explanation or justification. Moreover, the things the protagonist enjoys are ones Moretti *himself* enjoys: "These are the tapes that I like to listen to as I work, when I am home writing," he clarifies in an interview. "This is an attempt to express the feelings the Vespa and I (we are a single body) experience in one neighbourhood or the next."[49] The musical soundtrack of *Dear Diary* is in this regard analogous to the list *Manhattan*'s protagonist Isaac makes towards the end of Allen's film of "things that make life worth living," which is composed of items Allen himself is avowedly a fan of. The character who rides the scooter on the screen relates to the actual Moretti *in the same sense* Woody Allen meant when he quipped, in relation to *Annie Hall*: "I was playing myself, but not in autobiographical situations for the most part."[50]

[49] "Ce sont des enregistrements que j'aime écouter lorsque je travaille, lorsque j'écris ou lorsque j'essaie d'écrire, à la maison, le scénario d'un film … Il s'agissait d'exprimer le sentiment que la vespa et moi – nous constituons une entité – nous éprouvions dans tel quartier ou dans tel autre" (Gili 2017: 70).

[50] The thrust of Allen's full quote is, as ever, to deny the autobiographical nature of the work: "Very little of the film is autobiographical … There were a couple of things there that were based on reality" (Harry Haun, 1987, "The perfect sparring partner", *Daily News*, December 16, *apud* Tim Carroll, 1993, *Woody and his women*, London: Little, Brown & Company, p.137).

Some (though not all) of the scenes we witness in both Chapter One of *Dear Diary* and in *Aprile* are facsimilia of real events. As used to happen already in his earliest works, Moretti sprinkles these films with references to his recent cinematic experiences, using the opportunity to vent on his peeves and poke fun at critics. In *Aprile*, Silvia reads aloud the list of current releases, which gives Nanni the occasion to make various snide comments. At one point they go to see Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995), and, inevitably, in the following scene, the protagonist is shown sitting in the theatre, grimacing at the screen, just like he did in Chapter One of *Dear Diary*, in relation to *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. Back home, lying in bed with his eyes shut but talking aloud like a sleepwalker, Nanni repeats some lines from the film, as if he was haunted by them.[51] Distraught, he gets up in the middle of the night, still reciting the same lines of dialogue. Covering his face with his hands, he chastises himself:

> It's my fault! It is my fault that I've taken my son to watch a total piece of crap! Such films do influence children. They impinge on their personality – and then who knows what kind of personality they might end up with?

If there were any doubts that this matched Moretti's actual opinions, the director dispels them in interviews. "In the cases of *Heat* [Michael Mann, 1995] and *Strange Days*, I entirely agree with what I myself think," he playfully declares, confounding as usual his own position and that of the character.[52] "Not that I actually believe *Strange Days* could somehow have an impact on an infant in his mother's womb … but I really did not like that film."[53]

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[51] The repetition of sentences he finds particularly disgusting is another recurring trope: Michele does that in *Palombella rossa* with respect to some of the journalist's phrases, and so does Giovanni, in *The Son's Room*, in relation to the priest's speech on the occasion of his son's funeral as I mentioned in the previous chapter (in the section titled "Why are words important?").

[52] "Dans le cas de *Heat* et de *Strange Days*, je dois avouer que ce que j'en dis est en total accord avec ce que je pense moi-même" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 56). Again, the first 'I' in this sentence refers to the film's protagonist, and the second one to Moretti himself.

[53] "Quant à *Strange Days*, je ne pense pas, évidemment, que ce film puisse avoir une quelconque influence sur un enfant dans le ventre de sa mère … Mais, quitte à ne pas faire plaisir à beaucoup de cinéphiles italiens, je n'aime pas ce film" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 56).

There is also a political angle to the views expressed by the protagonist of *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*, one that is emphatically articulated as a first-person affair – a matter of "inclinations," "dispositions," "temperament."[54] Very early on in *Dear Diary*, while still watching the protagonist ride his Vespa, we begin to hear a dialogue from an Italian movie he will then be shown to be attending. As we watch him joyfully, leisurely ride his scooter through sunny roads, a man's voice is heard on the soundtrack for what feels like a long 15 seconds. The disembodied voice exudes sadness and self-pity: "I am afraid to rethink my life," he says, "I am a coward. What has happened in all these years? You tell me: I don't know any more." Only then do we get to see the source of the voice we had been hearing: in a film-within-the-film, two formally dressed men and a woman, roughly of Moretti's age, sit, chatting, in a drab, office-like background. One of them comments to the other two:

> Our generation, what has it turned into? We've become advertisers, architects, stockbrokers, members of parliament, political aides,[55] journalists. We're so changed! All for the worse! Today we're all accomplices, all compromised!

In the dark movie theatre, restless in his seat, Moretti fumes, while the man on the screen insists:

> We've become old, embittered, dishonest in our work. We used to shout awful, violent slogans in our protest marches… and now look just how ugly we've become!

The image cuts back to Moretti, again on his Vespa, looking relaxed and content, this time in a frontal shot from the belly up. In voice-over, Moretti retorts as if to the character on the screen: "*You* shouted awful, violent slogans, *you*'ve gotten ugly; my slogans were correct, and now I am a splendid 40-year-old!" This exultant proclamation is immediately followed by Leonard

[54] This too is in line with the art cinema paradigm, as described by Bordwell: "There is seldom analysis at the level of groups or institutions; in the art cinema, social forces become significant insofar as they impinge upon the psychologically sensitive individual" (2008: 154).

[55] In Italian, "*assessori*". In 1991, just two years prior to *Dear Diary*, Moretti played the protagonist in Daniele Luchetti's *Il portaborse*, a film that depicts the corruption of the Italian political system through the story of a political aide. "Portaborse" literally means the person carrying the suitcase. Moretti didn't merely play the lead role in *Il portaborse*; he also produced the film with Sacher.

Cohen's song "I'm Your Man" (1988) on the soundtrack, and the juxtaposition seems to add to the jubilant, but also self-mocking, tone.[56]

This confrontation, which comes up very early on in *Dear Diary*, hints at one of the main themes of Chapter One: a generational balance, at once personal and political, which takes place both at a conventional turning point in Moretti's life (the director turned 40 the year the film was released) and at a particular historical juncture, what at the time was dubbed "the end of history."[57] It is no coincidence that the professions the character enumerates are in the worlds of finance, politics, and propaganda, bulwarks of the ideology that proclaimed capitalism's final vindication. The political conflict *Dear Diary* stages here is also a generational reckoning, as it was precisely the people of Moretti's own age – and from his own social background – who in the early 1990s became the staunchest ideological supporters of the very social order they used to despise. "Many people in many countries change their minds. But in Italy we have a lot of them, in quantity and quality," the director said in an interview (Booth 2006). On another occasion, the filmmaker has explicitly commented on the scene from *Dear Diary*:

> With regards to those whiny 40-year-olds in the film I attend, I have often noticed that those who were once the most violent have become the most cynical. It's the same with the Berlin Wall: the most dogmatic ones, the ones who showed fewer qualms about the Eastern Europe regimes, … are precisely the ones who – after a moment of panic, when the dogmas crumbled – seem to feel most comfortable with the current system.[58]

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[56] Cohen sang: "If you want a driver/ climb inside/ Or if you want to take me for a ride/ you know you can/ I'm your man".

[57] In a much-debated article published in the summer of 1989, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama suggested the combination of liberal democracy and free markets might represent a sort of endpoint for political evolution ("The end of history?", *The National Interest 16*). The author would later backtrack on his thesis, but the idea that capitalism and liberal democracy had become "the only game in town" marked the intellectual debates of the next decade or two.

[58] "En parlant de ces hommes de quarante ans dans le film que je vais voir au cinéma et qui se plaignent, il m'est arrivé de remarquer que ceux qui ont été les plus violents deviennent, avec la maturité, les plus cyniques. La même chose peut valoir, par exemple, pour le mur de Berlin. Ceux qui ont été les plus dogmatiques et qui ont cru le plus dans les pays de l'Est … quand les dogmes s'écroulent ce sont peut-être ceux qui, après un moment de panique, se retrouvent le plus à leur aise dans l'"existant"' (Gili 2017: 69). Moretti speaks of *l'existant* – "that which exists" – which I've translated as "the current system". "Je n'arrive pas à trouver une meilleure expression que l'existant, car pour eux il y avait seulement les dogmes et l'existant. Au contraire, ceux qui, comme moi, étaient moins dogmatiques vivent l'écroulement des dogmes sans aucune panique. Ils conservent une attitude critique vis-à-vis de l'existant" (*idem*).

But does the movie featured within *Dear Diary* actually exist? Its status is not signalled at all within the sequence, so the wondering spectator will be left to wait for the final credits (if she is so persistent) to determine whether this is an excerpt from a previously existing film, or whether these are merely characters in the fictional world of *Dear Diary*. The latter turns out to be the case: the filmmaker has ironically chosen to use a *fake* film to deliver commentary on current events.

Both in form and theme, the scene of the fake film echoes the one in *Palombella rossa* which showed a left-wing student mob bullying a purported fascist, to Michele Apicella's intense dismay. Both scenes are "horrendous" by Moretti's own standards, that is, visually discordant from the rest of the works they feature in.[59] The film-within-the-film in *Dear Diary* is a pastiche of a generic Italian movie: "shabby cinematography, static camera, naturalistic acting, a living room where four or five characters lament their own generational failure," as Flavio De Bernardinis describes it (2006: 128).[60] Moretti and his film look entirely different from those characters on the screen. While they wallow in nostalgia – "Even optalidon are no longer the same," one of them complains, referring to a popular analgesic – Moretti feels "splendid" entering middle-age. The repentant characters on the screen used to shout "ugly" slogans because they belonged to those dogmatic sects of the far left with whom Moretti never felt any affinity; he never took part in the overbearing attitude of those who fancied themselves to be on the right side of history, and therefore he has nothing to repent for.[61] The casual clothes he wears, the helmet constantly on his head, the unassuming Vespa – these are all part of the contrast he establishes with the embittered people on the

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[59] See my comments on this scene in the previous chapter, in the section on "The Troubles of Political Commitment".

[60] "I film italiani si assomigliano tutti: un salotto con quattro-cinque amici che piangono il consueto fallimento generazionale, fotografia emaciata, macchina da presa fissa, recitazione vetero-naturalistica" (De Bernardinis 2006: 128).

[61] "Even today," the director declares, "if I see someone I dislike (a politician, a journalist, a filmmaker, or some other person) and it turns out they used to belong to one of those groups I hated, I say to myself: *Well, well – isn't that a coincidence!*" "Aujourd'hui encore, quand je vois une personne qui me déplait (un homme politique, un journaliste, un cinéaste ou un inconnu) et qui faisait à l'époque partie d'un de ces groupes que je détestais je me dis: 'Bon, d'accord, alors tout revient toujours!'" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 20).

screen. Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli note the self-satirical element in this representation: "In 'On My Vespa' Nanni is mocked for his looks – he is often shot from behind, looking up, wearing his helmet and with his arms behind his back, in a posture that reminds the spectator of the infant characters of the comic strip *Peanuts*" (2004: 109). This sort of self-mockery does not undercut our affection for the character, but rather reinforces it.

A similar opposition is suggested a little later, as a flashy, red convertible stops next to Moretti's scooter by a streetlight. Inside sits a presumably wealthy man who looks slightly younger than Moretti: not a repentant leftist like the earlier characters, but possibly a daddy's boy. With no kind of prompting, no attempt at an introduction, Moretti hops off his Vespa and addresses the man:

> You know what I was thinking? I was thinking a very sad thing: even in a more decent society than this one, I will only ever feel at ease with a minority of people. But not like in those pictures where a man and a woman hate each other, and fight on a desert island, because the filmmaker does not believe in people;[62] I believe in people. I just don't believe in the majority of people. I'll always be at ease and in tune with a minority…

Naturally, the man in the Mercedes shows no interest in the ramble and drives off as soon as the light switches, without waiting for Moretti to finish. There is surely an element of irony in the way the filmmaker is depicted, and yet his proclamation still carries some moral force. It is worth noticing that the man in the Mercedes differs from Moretti not just for his expensive car, but also because he appears to be exclusively focused on waiting for the light: entirely oblivious to his surroundings, he looks somewhat despondent. By contrast, Moretti seems constantly joyful throughout the episode, and appears to take great pleasure in the detailed attention he pays to his surroundings. He wanders, taking stock of the world that surrounds him: noticing the buildings, contrasting architectural styles across various

[62] Millicent Marcus (2002: 290) suggests this is yet another jab at Lina Wertmüller: a reference to her film *Travolti da un insolito destino nell'azzurro mare d'agosto* (*Swept Away*, 1974).

neighbourhoods, evincing a keen interest both in the social atmosphere of different quarters and in historical change.[63]

In *Aprile*, Moretti will also self-deprecatingly stage his purportedly preachy inclinations. "Sooner or later," the protagonist of the later work says, "I'll end up in London, on that corner of Hyde Park where on Sunday any nutter can say what he likes". He is then shown on Speaker's Corner, amidst assorted religious doomsayers, reading aloud excerpts from letters he would supposedly have been writing to the leaders of the Italian left for the previous twenty years. The trope hints at the moralist's vocation in Moretti's *persona*. The scene is of course fabricated, but the letters could be taken to stand for the director's actual criticisms of the Italian left, over and over through the years. In an interview, Moretti claims that while the film stages a crucial conflict at the heart of political commitment – that between speaking one's mind, at the risk of damaging one's own side, and political expediency – in reality he always preferred to say whatever he saw fit: "In fact, via my films, I have always sent [those letters]. I've never been calculating."[64] Again, the character on the screen speaks to the actual person – Moretti does poke fun at himself – and yet this should not lead us to assume a one-to-one correspondence between the two figures.

A whimsical protagonist

Even though one can find recurring topics across Chapter One of *Dear Diary*, I would not want to suggest that the episode is organized according to strict thematic continuity. Quite the opposite: "On the Vespa" is both literally and metaphorically digressive. Central to the diary trope is the freedom of its form, as if the film was composed of notes jotted down on a page as life happens. Millicent Marcus describes the film as "impressionistic, paratactic, and spontaneous, lacking any obvious structuring principle that would bind it

[63] Again this matches Bordwell's description of art cinema narration: "The drifting protagonist traces out an itinerary which surveys the film's social world. Certain occupations (e.g., journalism, prostitution) favor an encyclopaedic, 'cross-sectional' syuzhet pattern" (1985: 207).

[64] "En réalité, par le biais de mes films, je les ai toujours envoyées [ces lettres], je n'ai jamais faits de calcul'" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 169).

to a preestablished system of meaning" (2002: 291). The thing a diary most conspicuously *does not* possess is a dramatic narrative structure. Moretti freely switches topic, paying little heed to logic or plot; there is a strong element of free association, as if the film developed like a dream, where both plausible and implausible things can happen, and humour often derives from *non-sequitur*. Right after his interaction with the man in the Mercedes, Moretti declares:

> In fact, my dream has always been to dance well. *Flashdance* was the movie that forever changed my life. It was a film entirely about dancing, about knowing how to dance… but in the end I just watch, which is also nice, but something else altogether.

The notion that the life of the sardonic, self-ironic Moretti could be guided by something as lofty as a "dream" is disconcerting enough; that this dream might be to dance, that his model for great dancing would be the 1980s American box-office hit *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983), and that, of all movies, that would be the one to have "forever changed" the filmmaker's life defies all belief. This is Moretti in jest – but is it insincere? If it were merely false, it would not be funny. Moretti's avowed love for *Flashdance* seems perfectly consistent with the eclecticism of taste he constantly parades. Pop songs play an important part in his work: in practically all of his films there is a moment where the narrative pauses so that characters listen, and often dance, to some song. This device has a clear Brechtian ring: not only do the songs make plain the artificial, constructed nature of the tale, but they also ironically deflate the gravity of the events being told. A particularly exhilarating instance of this in Moretti's oeuvre is the scene in *Palombella Rossa* where Bruce Springsteen's song "I'm On Fire" (1985) starts playing on a small, portable radio next to the swimming pool during the water polo game: everybody pauses to listen, and then the entire pavilion starts singing along. No narrative justification is provided for the musical interlude, and the question of verisimilitude is obviously beside the point. In an interview, Moretti says he decided to include this song when he saw Springsteen in

concert, as if implying that to like the song was enough for it to feature in the film, regardless of immediate thematic connections.[65]

Because of its free, meandering structure, Chapter One of *Dear Diary* allows Moretti to take his enjoyment of idle musical moments a step further in relation to previous films. The *Flashdance* segment in Chapter One of *Dear Diary* is composed of two scenes. First, Moretti parks his scooter next to an outside ball, and the song that had been playing non-diegetically becomes diegetic. Initially, Moretti merely stands by, watching couples dance, but then he joins the band on stage, singing the refrain along with them. The clumsiness of the singing does not detract from his enthusiasm, and the fact that he is still wearing his helmet adds a cartoonish aspect to the performance. The song is the hugely successful "Visa Para Un Sueño" ("Visa for a Dream"), by Juan Luis Guerra, a Dominican singer and songwriter well-known for his eclectic mix of Afro-Latino musical styles. Parenthetically – for this is not underscored in *Dear Diary* – the lyrics (in Spanish) are a plea for the rights of immigrants, a topic that is dear to Moretti, as *Aprile* and indeed the more recent *Santiago, Italy* confirm.[66] Once Moretti stops singing, he approaches one of the couples in the crowd and addresses them unprompted, to tell them how he wishes he knew how to dance, how much *Flashdance* meant to him, even asking, rather incongruously, if Jennifer Beals, that movie's star, is somewhere in the ball. From the documentary-like naturalism in which Chapter One had begun, *Dear Diary* transitions almost imperceptibly to flaunt its fictional, even surrealistic features, with blatant disregard for plausibility.

As in a wish-fulfilment dream, as soon as he gets back on his Vespa, Beals materializes by the side of the road, strolling along Alexandre Rockwell,

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[65] "J'étais allé voir Springsteen en concert durant l'été [1988] au stade Flaminio, ici à Rome, alors que je préparais le film. Le morceau m'a plu tout de suite et j'ai voulu le mettre dans le film" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 116).

[66] *Santiago, Italy* is the first documentary of feature-length duration of Moretti's career. It dwells on Pinochet's coup in Chile in 1973, the second half of the film focusing on the story of dozens of Chileans who survived the coup by taking shelter in the Italian embassy, and then being granted asylum in Italy. The generosity with which they were treated is explicitly contrasted to the plight of more recent refugees, who are chased on the shores of the Mediterranean, and die in large numbers trying to cross it.

her then husband in actuality. The event is not motivated by either plausibility or narrative necessity. "I bump into people who – how shall I put it? – occurred to me," Moretti explains in the extras to the DVD.[67] The director insists on the idea that the kind of narrative freedom he gave himself in this film (and in *Palombella Rossa*) allows for unexplained, even "illogical" things to happen in the story.

> "On the Vespa" manifests my dissatisfaction with traditional forms of storytelling, something that was already present in *Palombella Rossa* – a desire to tell a story with more freedom … This freedom is matched by a refusal to explain things … I wanted to simply let the spectators see for themselves.[68]

He additionally points out that to have people dance in open air in the middle of the day may seem quite implausible, and yet he believes such lack of realism does not stand out.[69]

In the dialogue that ensues, Beals will provide the definitive assessment of Moretti's star image.[70] After randomly addressing her, the protagonist comments on her shoes, to the point that she confides to her husband that "this guy must be some feet maniac". Asked by Moretti if she had said he was crazy, Beals carefully probes for precision: "not crazy – off." Switching to Italian, she elaborates: "special, peculiar… nearly crazy, but not quite."[71] She then engages her husband in a discussion of the subtle intricacies of the American expression "off", to finally conclude, in Italian: "Dumb. Almost dumb."[72] Self-derision is obviously at work here, but there is more than that: an episode which had begun in a strikingly naturalistic,

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[67] As previously noted, Rockwell and Beals were in Rome for the screening of Rockwell's *In the Soup* (1992) at Moretti's art house cinema Nuovo Sacher. *Dear Diary* was initially conceived as a short film, to be screened alongside Rockwell's feature (Gili 2017: 59-61).

[68] "On trouve dans 'En Vespa' l'insatisfaction vis-à-vis d'une manière traditionnelle de raconter, insatisfaction déjà présente dans *Palombella rossa* avec la volonté de raconter plus librement … À la grande liberté du récit répond le refus de donner des explications: 'Je suis à Rome, nous sommes au mois d'août. Ah! que c'est beau, il n'y a pas de trafic automobile' … Non, rien de cela, seulement faire voir" (Gili 2017: 61-62).

[69] "Il est illogique de voir des gens danser dans la rue en août, sous le soleil, je le sais, mais lorsque l'on voit le film, cela paraît aller de soi" (Gili 2017: 63).

[70] The dialogue for this scene was written collaboratively by its three participants on the very morning of the shoot (Detassis 2002: 8).

[71] "*Vuol dire speciale, particolare – verso pazzo, ma non ancora*."

[72] "*Scemo. Quasi scemo*."

almost documentarian tone has in the meantime veered towards the overtly fictional; and yet the Moretti-like protagonist remains visibly the same, equally competent at representing the actual director and at embodying his persona's most outlandish features.

A similar mix of the factual and the fanciful occurs in *Aprile*. The opening scene takes place on the evening of Berlusconi's first electoral victory, in 1994. The protagonist and his mother sit in her actual living room despondently watching the news as, on TV, Emilio Fede, the newscaster for TG4 (one of the channels owned by Berlusconi's media conglomerate), delivers an emotional speech in praise of his boss. This is an actual event, which belongs to the public record – even though Moretti, in interviews, says that some spectators took the scene to be fabricated, so incredible the actual scene seemed to be, and so short is people's memory of public events.[73] After Fede speaks, Nanni narrates directly to the camera: "On the evening of March 28th, 1994, when the Right won, for the first time in my life I smoked a joint." He then proceeds to grab a huge, oversized marijuana cigarette, and lights it, his mother sitting impassively next to him. To borrow Bailey's expression yet again, the enormous, implausible joint is an "antimimetic emblem" that alerts us to the unreliability of what is being narrated; however, it does not detract from the reality, indeed the gravity, of the political scenes. The surrealistic element sets in relief an expressive intention: Moretti exaggerates in order to make a point. What allows us to tell the actual apart from the fictional in the scene is not a matter of film style (which has remained constant), much less of external indexing, but rather straightforwardly common-sense notions about plausibility.[74]

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[73] "L'inizio, con Emilio Fede che annuncia la vittoria di Berlusconi, è un documento … In tanti, dopo aver visto il film, mi hanno detto: 'Gentile, Emilio Fede. Quelle cose non le ha dette davvero, nel suo Tg. Le ha recitate per te, vero? Hai scritto tu il copione?' E invece Emilio Fede ha parlato così quattro, e non quarant'anni fa, tutti l'hanno visto quella sera in televisione, e quasi nessuno lo ricorda" (De Bernardinis 2006: 17).

[74] "Casebier claims other factors are essential in describing indexing, including our independent knowledge of the subject of the nonfiction and our common sense beliefs about the world" (Plantinga 1997: 21). The relevant reference here is Allan Casebier, 1991, *Film and Phenomenology – Towards a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. On the ways of distinguishing fictional from nonfictional stories, see chapter 3, in the section titled "Biographical echoes and spectatorial engagement".

Intimations of mortality

The final sequence of Chapter One of *Dear Diary* differs sharply in tone from the rest of the episode, making an about-turn with regards to what came earlier, back towards nonfictional representation. The transition is abrupt, as the director himself points out: a conventional script might not have afforded him the liberty to make such sudden shifts, Moretti says, but the diaristic structure of the film allowed for this.[75] In one farcical – even campy – sequence, the protagonist reads aloud, by a critic's bedside, excerpts of the latter's idiotic film reviews;[76] in the next, Moretti soberly browses newspaper clippings from the time of Pier Paolo Pasolini's death, the camera focused squarely on the grim news. The protagonist does not comment on what he reads, as he flips the yellowed pages of two decades ago, to the sole (nondiegetic) accompaniment of Keith Jarrett's Köln Concert, a virtuoso, largely improvised solo piano piece Jarrett recorded live in 1975 (the same year Pasolini was murdered). The absence of dialogue increases the spectator's focus on the news, whose titles dabble in details and unsolved questions regarding Pasolini's gruesome assassination. Finally, in voice-over, Moretti speaks: "I don't know why, but I'd never been to the site where Pasolini was murdered." As he says this, the image concurrently switches to a tracking, long shot of the beach of Ostia, in the outskirts of Rome, as seen from the road. The camera follows Moretti as he drives his Vespa through a semi-urban, disorderly, shabby area, but this time the emphasis is not so much on the man and the things he sees from his motorcycle, but on the road he travels, or rather: on his travelling the road, as in a pilgrimage. After the more surreal passages of Chapter One, the pendulum has swung back, firmly towards realism.

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[75] "En écrivant un scénario, il ne viendrait jamais à l'idée de passer de la scène où [Carlo] Mazzacurati joue le fou, avec ses fausses larmes de glycérine que lui mettait l'électricien, à la scène où je feuillette les journaux de l'époque de la mort de Pasolini, sur fond de Keith Jarrett. Et pourtant ça fonctionnait" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 147).

[76] These are excerpts from various reviews actually published in the left-wing daily *Il Manifesto*: "Elles ont toutes été publiées dans *Il Manifesto*, mais par différents auteurs" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 145). The campy aspect is intended: "On peut la trouver stupide, irrévérencieuse… dans son genre je la trouve très réussie" (*idem*).

For over four minutes, the camera will track on Moretti's back to no commentary, just Jarrett's piece on the soundtrack, giving the whole sequence a strong yet quiet elegiac tone, and in effect taking us along with the ride. The journey comes slowly to a halt as Moretti hops off his scooter and the camera abandons him, now capturing exclusively, at first in a long shot, the monument marking the site where Pasolini's body was found, then slowly tracking in on it, to finally stop in a static shot of the small, unassuming memorial piece amidst a wasteland.[77] Moretti is off-screen, and no commentary is offered; this is where the first episode of *Dear Diary* comes to a close, with Jarrett's piano piece proceeding to make a musical bridge over to the introduction of the following chapter of the film.

In the fragmentary spirit that characterizes *Dear Diary*, Moretti's homage to Pasolini stands on its own merits, and in a sense emphatically rejects any larger justification. Part of its strength stems from the contrast between the extremely violent circumstances of the poet's death (alluded to in the newspapers) and the quietness of Moretti's tribute. Meanwhile, appearing as it does at the close of the first episode, the segment establishes a meaningful thematic dialogue both with what came earlier and with what will come later in the film.[78] The focus of Moretti's tribute to Pasolini is neither on the latter's life nor on his works, but on his death; in choice of music, image, and the tone of the commentary, the segment contrasts starkly with an episode that had thus far been joyful, even jubilant. If Chapter One of *Dear Diary* dwells extensively upon things that give Moretti joy of a sensuous kind, largely unmediated by ideas – pleasures such as looking, listening to music, and dancing – the backdrop against which to make sense of this celebration, against which life becomes salient, is of course death.

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[77] Marcus claims Moretti pays tribute to Pasolini in film style. "The sequence … represents Moretti's personal 'translation' of Pasolini's essay 'Osservazioni sul piano sequenza' … With the extended-shot sequence that leads Moretti to the site, the filmmaker offers his own enactment of Pasolini's ontology of film" (2002: 294).

[78] Federica Villa (2007: 42) reads the music bridge linking chapters One and Two as an indication that *Dear Diary* is to be taken as a single, coherent project. "Lo scivolamento della musica dalle ultime inquadrature del primo capitolo all'inizio del secondo è segnale di una precisa volontà compositiva."

Looking at it from a biographical standpoint, the connection is strengthened: *Dear Diary* was the film Moretti made immediately after being treated for a rare type of cancer, and the spectre of death will lurk in the backdrop of the entire Chapter Three, the only one Moretti establishes as non-fictional. The director himself suggests this biographical angle:

> You could say that, in my actual life, the third chapter, the one about the disease, came first, and then there was that sense of joy, happiness, curiosity that you can see in my roaming around on the Vespa at the beginning.[79]

Chapter Three (titled "Doctors") recounts with wry humour Moretti's misadventures with modern medicine, but this does not detract from the fact that we are watching the story of how he survived a serious illness. Very early on, we are shown actual footage of his final chemotherapy session, and while this reassures the spectator about the likelihood of a happy ending (the last session marking the completion of a successful treatment), it also serves as a reminder of what is at stake. "We have witnessed the chemotherapy session in newsreel form, and this confers authority and gravity on the subsequent performance," Marcus points out (2002: 298). Moretti himself, in an interview, calls attention to his decision to place the scene at the beginning of the chapter, whereas, had he been faithful to the chronological order of events, it should have been its conclusion.[80] The fragment also stands out for being a "trace", an indexical record of the actual event, whereas the rest of the chapter is made of reconstructions – that is, in Gregory Currie's terms, "testimonies":

> Testimonies differ from traces also in [that] … we can draw and write about things that never happened or have not happened yet, but only real things can leave traces of themselves, and a trace can be only of something in the past and never of anything in the future. (1999: 287)

[79] "Si può dire che, nella mia vita, prima è venuto il terzo capitolo, quello della malattia, e dopo è seguito quel sentimento di gioia, di felicità, di curiosità che c'è nel girovagare in Vespa all'inizio del film" (Detassis 2002: 12).

[80] "Dans le film, je vais voir des médecins et le spectateur sait déjà ce que j'ai et comment ça finira. Au début du chapitre, je montre la chimiothérapie alors que, du point de vue de la chronique, cette séquence arrive à la fin" (Gili 2017: 65).

The inclusion of this scene therefore strengthens the nonfictional claim on which Chapter Three is grounded. As Plantinga pointed out in the passage quoted above, documentaries do not only assert things about the world – they typically also include visual evidence of what they assert.

It is worth noticing that the joyful tone which predominated in episode one of *Dear Diary* did not preclude some unspecified element that mysteriously kept the protagonist from fully engaging with life, giving his celebration a light tinge of sadness. Unable to dance, he was destined to merely watch – "which", he would point out, "is also nice, but something else altogether;" and, although he liked people, he seemed destined to "only feel at ease with a minority," something he deemed "a very sad thing".[81] Even as Moretti triumphantly declared himself "a splendid forty year-old", there was an implicit reminder of the passage of time, of approaching death. The point is brought home more explicitly in *Aprile*: on the occasion of the director's 44th birthday, a friend asks him up to what age he would like to live; Moretti says 80, and the friend, tape measure in hand, proceeds to subtract 20 centimetres from one meter, and then a further 44, providing Moretti with a visual representation of the 36 years left from the initial 80. "Oh no! What an idiot! I wanted to say 95, but he caught me off-guard!", Moretti later chastises himself as he roams on his Vespa (the scooter ride naturally evoking *Dear Diary*). At another point in *Aprile*, faced with ostensible difficulties in finishing the very film we are watching, he says (to himself): "You have to hurry. How long do you want to live for?"

Chapter Three of *Dear Diary* begins inside the same café where it will end. The location looks quite similar to the place where *The Son's Room* will

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[81] In interviews, Moretti is adamant to point out that "to feel at ease with a minority of people" is not quite the same as "being on the side of the minorities". He sees the latter as an "ideological position", whereas the former is something "more instinctive, more personal": an inclination, a temperament, rather than a theoretical standpoint. "That is not a statement of principle … but rather … the recognition of a fact." He furthermore notes this is not something he takes pleasure in: "Ce dialogue n'était pas une déclaration de principe et encore moins une idéologie. C'est quelque chose que je sens comme ça… une constatation. … Je m'aperçois qu'en fait je ne partage mes goûts qu'avec un nombre infime des gens. Et ça ne me fait pas du tout plaisir que nous soyons aussi peu nombreux" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 59-60).

begin, thus creating yet another visual bridge.[82] The connection is intriguing, for while the third episode of *Dear Diary* is straightforwardly autobiographical (that is, nonfictional), *The Son's Room* recounts an imaginary tale. In the closing scene of *Dear Diary*, a smiley, restored Moretti expresses to the camera the vigorous lesson that cancer imparted on him: "in the morning, before breakfast, it's healthy to drink a glass of water." In an interview, Moretti says he deliberately chose to close *Dear Diary* on this scene – as a sort of coda – and that was even one of the reasons that led him to place the episode on "Doctors" at the end of film, whereas, if we were to follow the chronological order in which events actually took place, it would have been the first one.[83] In the opening scene of *The Son's Room*, the protagonist, Giovanni (portrayed by Moretti), drinks his morning water with a deliberate gesture. Through the window of the café, he notices a parade of Hare Krishnas who chant and dance, and, with an expression of fascination and amusement, he decides to get out on the street to observe their celebration. It is as though the fictional protagonist of *The Son's Room*, who takes delight in this exuberant parade, was in some sense an offshoot of the actual man who relishes being alive in the earlier film, the location and the water providing the tokens of continuity.[84] Furthermore, it is worth noting that, despite the 8-year gap between the two works (which were not made sequentially), the fictional story of a psychoanalyst whose son dies in a diving accident (the fundamental premise of *The Son's Room*) was actually the first project

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[82] Moretti himself points this out in an interview: "La première scène [de *La chambre du fils*], après le générique, lorsque je bois un café au lait en lisant le journal qui est sur le réfrigérateur du bar, est exactement la fin du *Journal Intime* lorsque, dans un bar, je commande un café au lait" (Gili 2017: 93).

[83] "Già durante le riprese, avevo deciso l'ordine in cui avrei montato le tre parti. Dopo il racconto del tumore e della guarigione, e soprattutto dopo il finale con il bicchier d'acqua, non volevo aggiungere altro" (Detassis 2002: 12).

[84] In an interview at the time of the release of *The Son's Room*, the director says this sequence was conceived independently from the bulk of the narrative, and then inserted at the beginning of the film. He also says it reflects his own, personal fascination with Hare Krishna: "Souvent des séquences me viennent à l'esprit, avant même les sujets. Elles arrivent parfois à entrer dans l'ensemble du scénario du film. … Celle du début, par exemple, je l'avais dans l'esprit depuis longtemps, et, sans trop théoriser, il m'a semblé juste de la mettre au début du film. … Cela vient de mon expérience personnelle. Quand il m'arrive de voir (maintenant il y en a de moins en moins) des hare-krishna au milieu de la rue, je m'arrête toujours pour les regarder" (Codelli 20017: 10).

Moretti had in hands after finishing *Dear Diary*.[85] He did not proceed with it right away because his wife became pregnant at the time, and he preferred not to address such a sensitive subject; instead, he chose to record the birth of his actual son, an event *Aprile* extensively documents.[86]

The introduction to Chapter Three of *Dear Diary* is also remarkably similar to the beginning of the segment on Pasolini, at the close of Chapter One. First, Moretti silently flips through the pages of a newspaper; then he is shown writing in his notebook, sitting at a table, at centre-screen, as his voice-over conveys what he is writing:

> Dear diary: I've kept the medical prescriptions I accumulated over the course of a year, and also all the notes I sometimes took after seeing a doctor. Therefore, nothing in this chapter is invented: prescriptions, doctor's appointments, conversations with doctors.

As if to confirm the promise of reliability, the image track cuts directly to grainy, actual footage. At this stage, Moretti had the habit of occasionally filming fragments of his daily life in 16 mm, "as if jotting down notes I might then use at some later point."[87] In this case, he is reclined on a bed, half sitting, a little scruffy, wearing what looks like sleepwear, and speaking on the phone. "This is my last session of chemotherapy," he explains in voice-over, "the treatment one goes through for cancer, and I've decided to record it." In a long take, at a slow pace, we watch as he has his head bandaged and covered for the treatment, and then as the drug starts dripping towards his veins. Although Moretti looks somewhat frail and dishevelled (as if he had

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[85] Even before *Dear Diary*, Moretti had already been working on a script about a psychoanalyst with two grown-up children, though at this stage there was no mention of a child's death, which would in turn be the defining event of *The Son's Room*. Michele Apicella would once again have been the protagonist of this film that was never shot. The project was called *Islands*, and it also had some similarities with what became Chapter Two of *Dear Diary*. "Prima di *Caro diario* avevo cominciato a scrivere un film intitolato *Isole*: protagonista era il mio solito personaggio, Michele, che nella storia aveva due figli e si spostava per lavoro nelle altre isole. Faceva lo psicoanalista e, nel finale, quasi impazziva" (Detassis 2002: 7).

[86] "Le film parlait de la mort d'un fils et au même moment j'en attendais un: ça me faisait une drôle d'impression, de travailler là-dessus. En mars 1996, j'ai commencé à tourner les premières scènes d'*Aprile*" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 163).

[87] "De temps en temps, je tourne des bouts de film en 16 mm. …, des sortes de notes que je ne suis pas certain d'utiliser un jour" (Gili 2017: 64-65).

just woken up after not enough sleep), he seems to be in good spirits, and laughs while talking on the phone.

Concern for reliability extended to the choice of actors, to the writing of dialogue, and to the insertion of little traces of reality in Chapter Three of *Dear Diary*. Professional actors played the doctors, but Moretti says he preferred to cast non-famous ones, so as not to interfere with nonfictional engagement with the story.[88] The scenes are staged, and we need not assume that every feature matches the actual persons and depicted events, although Moretti vows for the reliability of the dialogues and of the fundamental elements narrated. This is consistent with Plantinga's observation that "A film may be globally indexed as nonfiction and nonetheless incorporate what are normally considered 'fictional' elements" (1997: 22). Furthermore, each medical appointment is followed by a straight shot of the prescription Moretti was handed: the actual piece of paper he received, an index of something that really occurred in the world, its authenticity attested to by its wrinkly, aged look.

By filming the appointments in a terse manner, the director achieves other rhetorical effects besides reliability: the repetitive structure is poignant without being shrill, and creates its own comedy. We watch as Moretti submits himself again and again to the same routine: he lies down, with nothing but boxer shorts on, on an examination table, to have his skin inspected by a doctor; he listens as he is given a diagnosis, assorted advice, and a medical prescription; he duly passes by a pharmacy to buy his medicines, the list of which grows longer with each visit; and finally, back home, all alone, he can't stop himself from scratching, often lying awake at night. There is suffering, and even despair in these scenes, but they are always expressed in a subdued manner; there is also humour of a deadpan kind. In interviews, the director emphasises the importance of finding the right "tone" to tell the story, one that would "not feel sadistic towards the

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[88] "In order to give more credibility to this chapter, I chose non-actors … [and] a couple of non-famous actors," the director states in the interview accompanying the DVD edition (*Caro Nanni – appunti da un film di Moretti*, dir. Francesco Conversano and Nene Grignaffini, 1993).

spectators, not morbid or self-complacent towards myself, and also not whiny or indignant about the doctors."[89]

The physicians, for their part, look very self-assured, but not very empathetic. Their advice is inconsistent: one opines Moretti's problem is lack of exposure to the sun, advising him to go "somewhere warm," the next one suggests the itching is a psychosomatic condition, while a third hastily concludes it must be the result of drinking excessive amounts of tea. Each one gives the impression of being guided by no more than a hunch, and yet none show any qualms about casting aside the prescriptions provided by their earlier colleagues, offering a whole new set of their own. As the list of medicines grows longer and longer, rather than a straight shot of the prescription, the camera starts to gently tilt downwards, to cover all the writing. The subtle camera movement makes a rhetorical point.

Do they know what they're prescribing? Advice hovers between the futile and the dangerous. Late in the episode, having registered no improvement whatsoever, Moretti decides to read the leaflet that accompanies each drug. Concluding most have no apparent relation with the symptoms that afflict him, he proceeds to discard them. Similarly, before taking vaccines for allergies he had been diagnosed with, he calls an immunologist friend. Over the phone, his acquaintance immediately dismisses the notion that the itching might be caused by allergies, and warns Moretti not to take such vaccines – for they might provoke an anaphylactic shock that could be deadly.

A particularly harsh look is reserved for a famous specialist Moretti calls "the prince of dermatologists." Moretti's initial calls don't get through, for the doctor is fully booked for the following three months. Eventually, thanks to a friend who puts a good word in, he gets to be seen. This practitioner's office is more solemn, more distinguished than the previous ones, with a conspicuous old portrait hanging on the wall, and shelves full of

[89] "J'ai décidé de [raconter cette histoire] quand j'ai compris que j'avais trouvé le ton juste, c'est-à-dire un ton non sadique vis-à-vis du spectateur, non morbide et non complaisant vis-à-vis de moi-même, non plaintif et non indigné vis-à-vis des médecins" (Gili 2017: 63).

books behind the specialist's desk. But the scene is still essentially similar, the doctor reciting, with unhurried emphasis, a long list of drugs that includes, amongst other things, three different shampoos Moretti must use on a daily basis. He goes on to advise Moretti to always wear knee-high cotton socks and long-sleeved shirts – "even though it is the summer and it is very hot … even on the beach. The skin must always be in contact with cotton." By way of conclusion, he tells Moretti what great fans of his films he and his family are, and proceeds to provide the patient with his beach house phone number, so Moretti can reach him during the summer holidays. He finishes by calling his assistant, telling her on the spot – right before Moretti's eyes – to make "*Signor* Moretti" a "special price". This exuberant display of courtesy has no visible effect on the patient's condition: after gathering a large pile of medicines at the pharmacy, he is once more shown at home, in the middle of the night, unable to sleep because of the itching. Next he is at the beach, wearing socks up to his knees, shoes, and a long-sleeved shirt – a rather implausible, almost surreal figure amidst the carefree beach-goers.

Unable to clearly identify the source of Moretti's woes, some physicians border on the outright dismissive. More than one suggests the affliction to be psychogenic, possibly imaginary. After seeing a dermatologist who tells him he is "acting like a loser," Moretti theatrically responds, alone in his car, on the drive back home, by reciting these words aloud as if they were part of some magical healing process:

> Today I am convinced that the cause of this itch is solely of a psychological nature. It depends on me, it's my fault, only my fault … It depends on me. The doctor says I must cooperate, that I must try hard not to scratch: it all depends on me.
>
> And, if it depends on me, I am sure I am not going to make it.

The latter line is echoed in *The Son's Room*, creating another link between the actual Moretti and Giovanni, the fictional protagonist of the later film. As noted above, we need not believe that all that is depicted in Chapter Three of *Dear Diary* matches actual events, and the litany Moretti recites on this occasion, with its echoes of the Catholic prayer of confession ("it is my fault,

only my fault"), does sound as if it had been written. In *The Son's Room*, one of the psychoanalyst's patients, Oscar (Silvio Orlando), is diagnosed with cancer. Lying on the couch, he speaks about the importance of adopting the right attitude towards the disease, and then asks the therapist for his opinion:

> *Patient:* In the end, everything depends on one's attitude. One mustn't give in, right?
>
> *Therapist:* People often say the patient's psychological attitude is fundamental to the cure…
>
> *Patient:* Don't you think?
>
> *Therapist:* No, I don't believe in that. Serious illnesses can be cured even if you're passive; even if you don't want to live. On the other hand, if things have to end badly, they'll end badly, even if the patient does his best and fights back. It ends badly even if the patient at all costs wants to live. That's what I think.
>
> [Awkward silence ensues.][90]

In *Dear Diary*, the shallow psychology of the dermatologist is implicitly compared to that of a "reflexologist" who comes to Moretti's apartment to give him a foot massage. "For itching, you must absolutely avoid all red foods," she asserts. Echoing the allergists who had pronounced Moretti intolerant to an incredibly vast array of edibles, she proclaims: "Tomatoes, carrots, oranges, strawberries – red foods, nil!"[91] Like the doctors', moreover, her diagnosis has a bogus psychological dimension: "I see you've hurt your big toe. The toe is the head: you wanted to hurt your head last night." The sources of such psychological insight are at best mysterious – but, then again, no more so than the specialists'. Speaking as if the reflexologist could not hear him

[90] By juxtaposing the words of the protagonist of *Dear Diary* with those of Giovanni in *The Son's Room*, I may seem to be suggesting these are Moretti's actual views. Although that does look like a reasonably safe bet, we must tread cautiously here: Giovanni's lines are part of a fictional story where the character harbours great resentment towards this particular patient, and the scene is doubtless meant to convey that too.

[91] Moretti takes comic relish in spelling out the list of foods that are supposedly bad for him: "Corn, barley, oats, garlic, onion, mustard, almonds, beans, soy, peas, parsley, artichokes, lettuce, tea, hops, pepper, chestnuts, salmon, sardines, tuna, cow milk protein, cow casein, goat casein, Swiss cheese, gorgonzola, dutch, and pork." There is a Borgesian ring to this list, as if it was meant to illustrate the arbitrariness of any conceptual system for organizing the world. See Jorge Luis Borges' famous short essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (Borges 1964 [1952]).

despite being in the same room with him – in the "off-screen on-screen" technique mentioned earlier – Moretti concludes, with a mix of scepticism and bonhomie: "I didn't know if those massages would do me good, but they'd do no harm. It was pleasant. That half hour relaxed me."

Faced with the arrogance and ineffectiveness of specialists, Moretti starts exploring "alternative" therapies, while never renouncing a basic sceptical demeanour. A frontal shot shows him having his pulse taken by two Chinese doctors, one on each side. Speaking aloud, but again as if they could not hear him, Moretti narrates to the camera, explaining he has been losing weight and is now suffering from night sweats. The doctors' facial expressions are hard to read: past Moretti, they speak to one another in Chinese, and, as if to emphasise the opaqueness of the situation, the dialogue is not subtitled. Moretti obviously cannot understand a word they say, and neither can we: he is the passive, compliant subject of specialists' enquiries, handing his body over for them to fix it. He has no grasp of how they do it, for their methods are impenetrable, perhaps supernatural. One of the Chinese doctors asks Moretti whether he has been "exposed to wind." Slightly baffled, he says he often rides a Vespa, but "Rome isn't that windy…" Next, the doctor asks about "fallen kidneys". As Moretti struggles to make sense of the question, an Italian translator comes in to explain: "Dr Yang wants to know if you've overindulged in sex over the past year."[92] The puzzling nature of the questions reinforces his sense of powerlessness, while adding a comic touch. The very shot of Moretti with the Chinese doctors taking his pulse from both sides has an element of deadpan humour to it, which is not incompatible with the undercurrent of sadness that runs through the episode; stone-faced humour and subdued despair seem both to be part of Moretti's overall sceptical demeanour.

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[92] Yang *could* of course be the Chinese doctor's actual name, but I would be inclined to take it as a jesting nod at the yin/yang duality in Ancient Chinese philosophy, of which the two doctors would be a literal embodiment. Moretti's promise of referential reliability does not extend to such details as characters' names, and – as Plantinga indicates in the quote above – the latter (if fabricated) would not undermine the overall trustworthiness of the tale.

Moretti goes through acupuncture, and then electro-acupuncture. His facial expression looks tired and hopeless, but in voice-over he comments he gets to doze off during the treatment, suggesting he finds it to be at least relaxing. At home, he carefully applies moisturizer on his skin: short of finding a cure, he gets by with whatever may offer relief. "For now, acupuncture has had no effect on either the itch or the insomnia," he notes, "but at the Chinese Medicine Centre everybody is nice, there's a pleasant atmosphere, so I keep trying." There is a subtle nod to the irrationality of insisting on a treatment that offers no relevant results, but Moretti's loss of faith is suave: he tries to get by on simpler things, such as a "nice atmosphere."

It turns out it is precisely the Chinese doctors' agreeableness, their modesty, that saves the day. After some time, Dr Yang himself points out that the patient isn't getting any better, and is coughing heavily. Since the acupuncture sessions are producing no results, he should rather get a chest x-ray, which will end up revealing Moretti has cancer.

For the first time in the episode, Moretti is not alone facing the doctors. After he goes through a CAT scan, the radiologist speaks to Silvia and Angelo,[93] telling them the filmmaker appears to have lung cancer at a very advanced stage, beyond any hopes of remission. Lying inside the CAT scan, Moretti narrates directly to the camera once again:

> Luckily, the radiologist guessed wrong. Two days later they operate on me, and a doctor friend who was present tells me that, during the surgery, looking at a piece he'd cut out, the surgeon said: "I'll bet one of my balls this is Hodgkin's lymphoma. I can't bet both of my balls – but one, yes."

The dramatic situation is treated in a comical and utterly non-dramatic tone. Moretti proceeds to explain that Hodgkin's lymphoma is a rare, yet treatable, type of cancer of the lymphatic system, concluding: "Then, one day, at home, I

[93] Angelo Barbagallo, Moretti's longtime friend and collaborator, it is to be assumed. The lack of introduction to characters seems to authenticate the truthfulness of the tale: we are told about the people who happened to be there on the occasion, but such persons are not characters performing roles within a story. Or rather: the fact that they perform no other functions within the tale suggests that the task they perform is that of attesting its veracity.

leaf through a handbook called Garzanti Medical Encyclopaedia. Under lymphoma, it says: 'symptoms include itch, weight loss, and sweating.'" In the final scene, as mentioned above, Moretti commemorates with a glass of water not just the successful completion of his treatment, but also – implicitly – a newfound independence towards the authority of doctors. In an interview, the director spells out this point:

> One thing I've learned from this contretemps is that it no longer suits me to be subjected to doctors. This submissiveness to the wizard is an attitude in which we all share; we've been carrying it within us for thousands of years. One is ill, and then one has to pay to be put in a state of subservience towards a specialist. I, for one, won't do that again.[94]

Who is Moretti now?

After three full decades of filmmaking where he had always played the lead in his own pictures, *The Caiman* (2006) is the first Moretti film where the director appears in a supporting role. *The Caiman* tells the fictional story of a film producer, Bruno Bonomo, and a young director, Teresa, trying to make a film about the Italian prime minister at the time, Silvio Berlusconi. This second film – the film within the film – is also titled "Il caimano", a moniker that originated in an actual newspaper piece, in 2002, where Berlusconi's smile was compared to that of the tropical variant of the alligator (Cordero 2002). In a surprising twist, however, in the final few minutes of *The Caiman*, the actor embodying the Italian Premier in the movie-within-the-movie is none other than Moretti (though his name is never actually uttered).

It is common to think of *Aprile* as a sequel to *Dear Diary*, in that both assume a diaristic guise; it is also possible, however, to couple *Aprile* with *The Caiman*, and to read the latter film, in some respects, as a sort of sequel

[94] "J'ai appris quelque chose de cette vicissitude. Sur un point, j'ai changé: cela ne me convient plus d'être assujetti aux médecins. C'est une attitude que nous avions tous, nous portons cela en nous depuis des milliers d'années, la soumission au sorcier. Il est curieux de voir que quelqu'un qui est déjà malade doit en plus payer et être dans un état de sujétion vis-à-vis des médecins. Moi, au moins, la sujétion, je l'ai éliminée" (Gili 2017: 63).

to the former one, even if the two were not made sequentially.[95] Both *Aprile* and *The Caiman* retell their protagonists' attempt to make a movie about Berlusconi, and in both films such an attempt is only partially successful. Both films, moreover, bring together political events and a personal story, as two strands that run in parallel while barely impacting on one another. There is hardly anything either fictional or personal in the segments of *The Caiman* that deal with the Italian magnate; on the other hand, the political events have no direct impact on the personal lives of the fictional characters. Similarly, in *Aprile* Moretti stages the making of a political documentary, which he embeds in make-believe fragments of his personal life: the fictionalization belongs squarely with the personal aspects, whereas there is nothing fictional in the political ones.

The protagonist of *The Caiman* is a producer of pulp movies, and there is certainly an ironic suggestion in the idea that only someone who has dabbled in the grotesque would ever be apt to make a movie on Berlusconi.[96] However, it's been ten years since Bruno Bonomo last managed to make a movie, and, on both the personal and the professional fronts, his life is coming to pieces. He tells little white lies to forge control over his current project, promising one thing to Teresa, the young filmmaker who approaches him with a script, while saying something different to the potential funders at RAI, the Italian state-owned TV channel. His name, a combination of the Italian words *buon* and *uomo*, suggests Bonomo is a good guy, but he is also patently ineffective. His wife, Paola (Margherita Buy), wants a divorce, while Bonomo demurs, inventing fantastic stories so as to prevent his children from learning about the break-up. He lives partly through denial.

Notwithstanding the differences between *Aprile* and *The Caiman*, the plot of the later work could to some extent be construed as a development of the earlier one, depicting the same basic set-up a few years down the road.

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[95] As noted above, the temporal sequence (*Aprile* being made immediately after *Dear Diary*) was somewhat fortuitous. After he finished *Dear Diary*, Moretti started working on what would eventually become *The Son's Room*. *The Caiman* was thus the first new project Moretti came up with after *Aprile*, since *The Son's Room* was the completion of a previous idea.

[96] Chatrian and Renzi make this point, in conversation with Moretti: "Le seul producteur qui a le courage de faire un film sur Berlusconi est un expert de films de sous-genre" (2008: 211).

While *Aprile* shows the birth of its protagonist's son and the first time in history the Italian left won a general election – hence the film's title, which stands for the month when both events took place, in 1996[97] – *The Caiman* tells the story of the dissolution of its protagonist's marriage, and of what seems to be, in the fictional realm, Berlusconi's ultimate victory. It is as if the later film played the same themes as the earlier one, but on a grimmer note. The similarity is counter-intuitive, for, while *The Caiman* is ostensibly fictional, *Aprile* is openly autobiographical. But both stories can be read through a biographical prism, at least to some extent: one can notice, for instance, that, at some point between the making of the two films, the real-life couple that *Aprile* puts at it centre (Nanni and Silvia) actually ended in amicable break-up, just like the fictional couple (Bruno and Paola) from *The Caiman*. Similarly, on the political front, the gloomy tone of the later film tracks actual developments: the victory that *Aprile* celebrates came to an end in 2001, as Berlusconi managed to return to power and, this time, to hold it for a full term. In the – fictional – final scene of *The Caiman*, the Italian Prime Minister is sentenced to seven years in jail, but he defies the verdict and is cheered as he exits the court, while the judges are attacked by crowds and forced to flee. While the incident is not faithful to actuality, it does speak to a real event: the occasion, in 2003, when the Parliament swiftly approved a law granting the Italian Premier immunity from trial so as to help Berlusconi avoid an accusation that could have landed him in jail.[98]

To some extent at least, we need to think of the fictional protagonist of *The Caiman*, played by Orlando, as a stand-in for the director. Like practically all Morettian protagonists, Bonomo has trouble adjusting to social

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[97] *Aprile* could also be taken metonymically to refer to Liberation Day, April 25, which commemorates the end of the Nazi occupation of Italy, in 1945. The date is annually celebrated in marches and parades that are especially dear to the Italian left.

[98] Clodagh Brook describes: "The final scene is based on the 2003 trial in which Berlusconi was accused of bribing two judges … The female magistrate [state attorney Ilda] Boccassini … wanted Berlusconi to be jailed and forbidden from taking up political office for the rest of his life. Instead, Berlusconi evaded the courtroom, and soon afterwards the case had to be dropped due to 'extenuating circumstances', that is, his role as Prime Minister. Moretti imagines an ending in which Boccassini gets her way and succeeds in condemning Berlusconi to imprisonment. Even this victory, however, is shown to be futile in defeating the invincible Premier" (2009: 117). For a short summary of the actual events, see for instance Philip Willan, "Italian PM accused of bribing judge", *The Guardian*, May 24th, 2003.

norms, to the way things are supposed to be done, and this leads him to fits of despair. At an ice cream parlour, he flies into a rage because the waiter refuses to sell him ice cream: Bonomo lives too far away and it would melt, the waiter claims. The episode brings to mind the one in *Ecce bombo* where Michele has a fit at a café because another customer, making small talk, remarks that in Italy all politicians are the same – fascists or communists, they're all the same ilk. Similarly to Michele, Bonomo seems oblivious to the excess in his own reactions, and this makes him both comical and endearing: his outbursts are ridiculous, but the maladjustment is in a way a measure of his sanity.[99] Bonomo is childish, comical, and histrionic, making grandiose plans that stand no chance of becoming real; like Michele, he is most at ease in a world of fantasy. However, his narcissistic traits are less pronounced than Michele's, and it is debatable whether the kind of comedy the two figures pursue is really analogous – an issue I will come back to below.

Differently from the actual Moretti, the fictional protagonist of *The Caiman* has made a career out of avowedly B-movies. At various points, we get to see excerpts of these fictive productions, and they certainly look very different from Moretti's work.[100] Bonomo has never had any interest in political cinema: "I hated those films even 30 years ago!" he exclaims, in a remark that could be taken as a teasing reference to Moretti's first feature, released exactly thirty years prior to *The Caiman*. However, Moretti himself has often protested his dislike for most of what passes for political cinema, and indeed the director confirms: "I feel at once close to Teresa, who wants to

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[99] Moretti acknowledges the affinity between Bonomo and earlier protagonists with reference to this particular scene. In a post-screening debate in Milan that is included as an extra to the Italian DVD edition ("Incontri con il pubblico"), he recounts the day Orlando had to do the scene at the ice-cream parlour, and says the actor suggested Moretti should play it himself, since it had his fingerprints all over it. Moreover, as if to confirm the absence of self-awareness that is an integral part of his fictional protagonists, Moretti adds that the scene pokes fun at the rigidity of a very famous ice-cream parlour in Rome. It is the moderator, sitting next to Moretti, who adds: "It also pokes fun at the client's rigidity, something that suits you perfectly…" Moretti laughs.

[100] This is a point Moretti himself articulates: "Par le biais du travail de Bruno Bonomo, nous voulions nous amuser avec une certaine manière de faire du cinéma très éloignée de nous, et très éloignée aussi des spectateurs d'aujourd'hui'" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 210-211).

make the film [on Berlusconi], but also to Bruno, who says he hated political cinema even 30 years ago."[101]

In their surrealistic quality and quirky sense of humour, Bonomo's escapist movies do have a link with Moretti's. Bonomo's old production *Cataracts* features a Maoist wedding ceremony, which, in its incongruity, brings to mind the idea for a musical about a Trotskyite pastry cook adumbrated in *Dear Diary* and developed in *Aprile*. Outlandish as it may seem, the exchange of wedding vows in a room covered with the effigies of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao was inspired by an *actual* event: on January 8, 1972, in Milan, two members of the Maoist newspaper *Servire il Popolo* were united in "marriage" by their organization.[102] Maoist groups tried to make sure their members abided by what was thought to be the common morality of the proletariat: to be united in (heterosexual) marriage, to play by the rules of monogamy, and to dress modestly. By contrast, Trotskyites tended to embrace more liberal sexual mores – and Moretti did take part in a Trotskyite group, even if shortly, in his adolescence. The Maoist wedding ceremony is therefore a sort of a gothic double of the musical about the Trotskyite pastry cook.

A second clip from *Cataracts* presents the heroine, Aidra, meting out retribution on an unscrupulous food critic, who in excruciating pain confesses it's been fifteen years since he's had sinusitis and lost all sense of taste. It is a gore variation on a fantasy from *Dear Diary*, in which Moretti tortured a film critic by reading him excerpts from his idiotic writing, while the critic cried and begged for mercy. Additionally, as the Italian scholar Giorgio Cremonini perceptively notes, the Aidra episode parodies the genre of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, the film that in *Dear Diary* motivated Moretti's vengeful fury: "The sequence [in *The Caiman*] spoofs a sort of facile Tarantinism in

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[101] "Je me sens à la fois proche de Teresa, qui désire faire ce film, mais aussi de Bruno qui dit: 'Je n'aimais déjà pas les films politiques il y a trente ans, alors aujourd'hui!'" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 208).

[102] "E poi l'episodio più noto, il matrimonio comunista celebrato a Milano l'8 gennaio 1972 fra Sergio Bisi e Cristina Soraci davanti ai ritratti di Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin e Mao. Fu soprattutto una grande mossa di marketing, ma i due stanno ancora insieme: hanno gestito un distributore di benzina, ora commerciano in libri antichi" (Vecchio 2008).

vogue."[103] By playing the tormented film critic in the earlier film and the waiter who serves the food in the later one, Carlo Mazzacurati is the personal link connecting the two scenes.[104]

In interviews, Moretti sometimes refers to Bonomo in the first person, just as he had always done in relation to the fictional protagonists he had personally embodied. At one point the director even implies he is doing so unwittingly:

> *Moretti:* When I… I keep saying *I* when I mean the character played by Silvio [Orlando], and saying *my children* when I am talking about Bruno and Paula's children. There seems to be something going on here...
>
> *Question:* Something that is working surreptitiously?
>
> *Moretti:* Well… yes.[105]

The passage implies Moretti is as connected to Bonomo as he was to the previous protagonist in his films.

Meanwhile, the director has also indicated his kinship with Teresa, notably with regard to the film she is trying to make. If Bonomo is fundamentally indifferent to political cinema, she on the contrary believes a film about Berlusconi is "urgent", a word choice that echoes Nanni's ponderous proclamations in *Aprile*. In the earlier film, Nanni repeatedly insisted: "Abroad, people want to understand what is happening in this country." Furthermore, one of the reasons motivating Teresa is that, "abroad, people cannot understand how a guy like [Berlusconi] has been able to paralyze Italy with his personal problems for twelve years." These words echo the ones *the actual* Moretti had said eight years earlier, at the time of *Aprile*'s release. In an interview with the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the filmmaker stated: "What I find most astonishing is the way the Italian right has spent the past

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[103] "*Cataratte* … appartiene al filone, ovviamente virato al grottesco, di Henry pioggia di sangue, della cui entusiastica recensione Moretti non perdonava in *Caro diario* il 'critico' Carlo Mazzacurati … La sequenza ironizza sul facile tarantinismo alla moda" (Cremonini 2006: 3).

[104] Mazzacurati (1956-2014) was a director and screenwriter most famous for *The Right Distance* (*La giusta distanza*, 2007). His directorial debut, *It's Happening Tomorrow* (*Domani accadrà*, 1988), was also the first film Moretti's Sacher Film produced.

[105] "Quand je… Je continue à dire 'je' pour évoquer le personnage interprété par Silvio [Orlando] et à dire 'mes enfants' quand je parle des enfants de Bruno et Paola. Par conséquent, il y a quelque chose… *Q: Quelque chose qui travaille souterrainement?* A: Eh oui" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 216).

few years entirely consumed by Berlusconi's personal problems."[106] The director is entirely forthcoming about the fact that the fictional Teresa articulates the outrage he personally feels about Berlusconi, and about the generalized complacency from which, in his view, the Italian magnate benefits amongst cinema people. "I share her disbelief at Berlusconi," he said in an interview, "and also at the fact that no one – no screenwriter, no filmmaker – has tried to tell the story of a phenomenon that has wreaked such havoc with the country."[107]

In addition to Bonomo and Teresa, *The Caiman* comprises a third directorial surrogate: Moretti himself shows up unannounced halfway through the film, relying on spectators' recognition to dispense with any kind of introduction. Contrary to what one might assume about the actual filmmaker, however, when Bonomo and Teresa try to persuade "Moretti" to play the title role in their film, he demurs. He is sceptical, and even somewhat scornful, of Teresa's idealism, deeming the whole enterprise pointless: "Everybody knows all there is to know about Berlusconi. Those who want to know, do. Those who don't want to know…" Not even bothering to read the script, "Moretti" claims to already know what's in it: "It's what left-wing audiences love to hear: Berlusconi, who messes up his facelift but not his hair transplant. What a laugh!" Even though Teresa denies that is a fair characterization of her project, "Moretti" retorts: "I know, but everybody laughs – although they shouldn't."

The discussion takes place inside a car, with "Moretti" at the wheel, the radio loudly playing Salvatore Adamo's 1966 romantic hit "Lei" (that is: "She"). By forcing them to shout so they can hear each other, the music gives an emphatic aspect to everything they say; at the same time, the uncomplicated pleasure "Moretti" takes in the song undercuts the seriousness

[106] "La chose la plus incroyable concernant la droite italienne de ces dernières années, c'est que pratiquement tous ses dirigeants se sont focalisés sur les problèmes personnels de Berlusconi" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 55).

[107] "Je me retrouve dans l'artisanat de Bruno Bonomo, dans son rapport permanent, presque physique, avec le travail; et en même temps je me retrouve dans le personnage de Teresa, dans son incrédulité face au phénomène Berlusconi et au fait que personne, aucun scénariste ni réalisateur, n'ai voulu raconter ce phénomène qui a tellement dévasté l'Italie" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 205).

of the discussion. “Excuse me,” he says at one point, “but I like this song too much.”[108] He turns the volume up and interrupts himself in order to sing along. Much to Teresa’s dismay, “Moretti” claims not to be interested in political films, and – picking once more on the opposition between civic responsibility and fun which had been dramatized in *Aprile* – he says he would rather make a comedy. And yet, he likes Teresa: “She’s stubborn… and a touch unpleasant,” “Moretti” says. “I like that.” It is an ironic characterization in that it evidently suits him.

What happens between *Aprile* and *The Caiman* is not simply one character taking the place of another: say, Teresa now occupying the role of the civic-minded filmmaker, previously played by Nanni.[109] Instead, the directorial figure splinters into three different people, the earlier protagonist decomposing into several characters, offering us an opportunity to compare them and see how they interact. Moreover, these three different characters are matched by three different ways of presenting Berlusconi’s story, which we are successively shown in the film. Therefore, the short dialogue between Teresa, “Moretti”, and Bruno in the car casts light on the entire film – on the pros and cons of making a particular kind of film on Berlusconi.

Three ways of staging Berlusconi

Like other works by Moretti, but perhaps to a greater extent, *The Caiman* has an overt element of collage. It encompasses clips from seven different films: two previous Bonomo pictures (that is, movies that exist only in the fictional realm of *The Caiman*), three different ways of staging *Il caimano* (the film within the film), television footage of Berlusconi, and a scene from Hayao Miyazaki’s animation *Spirited Away* (2001). The stylistic dissonance this produces is compounded by the fact that the majority of the clips come up unannounced, something that provokes – to borrow Bordwell’s phrase –

[108] Indeed, Moretti had included the same song in the soundtrack of *Ecce bombo* already.

[109] In *Aprile*, Nanni was, on the face of it, very preoccupied with his civic responsibilities. However, by constantly proclaiming aloud his ponderous duty to make a documentary about Italy, such manifest content was sabotaged by an unmistakable undertone of farce.

"unexpected shifts between levels of fictionality" (1985: 211-212), allowing for parody of various film genres.[110] *The Caiman*'s very opening scenes are, we realize later, from Bonomo's previous movie, *Cataracts*.[111] In their escapism, surrealism, and gore, they blatantly undermine the expectations of spectators who had come to watch a left-wing satire about current events. Moretti had done this exact same thing at the opening of *Ecce bombo* (1978), in a scene I have discussed in Chapter 4.[112]

Released two weeks before a crucial general election, *The Caiman* had been anxiously anticipated. The film's presentation to the press prompted comparisons with Fellini's grand opening nights in the 1960s: "it was the kind of event we had long forgotten about," De Bernardinis writes (2006: 183).[113] *The Caiman* went on to an initial release in 380 movie houses nationwide, which compares with only 68 for Moretti's previous *The Son's Room* (Brook 2009: 121). It prompted analogies with Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which had been released in the U.S. a couple years earlier with the explicit intention of having an impact in the 2004 Presidential election. Italian TV channels declined to publicize or review Moretti's film during the electoral period, on the grounds that no right-wing filmmaker had made a corresponding movie on Romano Prodi, the leader of the centre-left. Even Prodi declared he hoped the film would prove to be "useful, not detrimental," an observation which managed to irritate Moretti.[114]

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[110] In chapter 4 I have discussed Moretti's relationship to art cinema narration in some detail, including his proclivity to insert bits of discordant film textures in his films. See the section on "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody". However, the clip from *Spirited Away* seems to be included not as parody, but rather as homage.

[111] Silvia Carlorosi plausibly suggests that the title of Bonomo's ersatz movie is another way for Moretti to poke fun at critics: to they enjoy that kind of picture, they must suffer from vision problems. "Uno degli argomenti centrali del *Caimano* è dunque la crisi del cinema italiano, in perenne difficoltà anche a causa dell'occhio malato del pubblico, la cui coscienza politica è impedita dalle cataratte, il film di serie B, d'azione, di costume, o comici sempre riproducendosi nel loro modi autoreferenziali" (Carlorosi 2011.: 92).

[112] See the section on "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody".

[113] "A Roma, l'evento è di quelli che ormai abbiamo dimenticato, degno di una grande prima felliniana anni Sessanta, o della Hollywood sul Tevere, come fu per esempio il film *La bibbia* di John Huston-Dino de Laurentiis: 500 accreditati, fra cui inviati di *Le Monde* e *New York Times*" (De Bernardinis 2006: 183).

[114] In *The Diary of the Caiman*, a 60-minute making-of documentary directed by Susanna Nicchiarelli that is included as an extra to the Italian DVD edition, Moretti says: "The leader of the [centre-left] coalition uses two adjectives I can't quite comprehend in relation to a film: he says he hopes it will be useful, not detrimental."

When *The Caiman* came out, however, it turned out to be not so much Berlusconi's story, but rather that of two fictional characters trying to make a film about the Italian Prime Minister. Was this still a political intervention? I think so: the film raises political issues in both subject matter and in form – as the director had long insisted it should. The metacinematic frame (a film about making a film about Berlusconi) enables Moretti to speak not just about the Italian Premier, but also about the modes in which it may be possible (and useful) to depict such a figure in a film.[115]

While Moretti's earlier *Sweet Dreams* (1981) had often been compared to Fellini's *8½*, the parallel may be even closer with *The Caiman*, in that its central theme is how to make the very film we are watching.[116] In his seminal essay on *8½*, Christian Metz had written:

> It is one thing in a film to show us a second film whose subject has no relationship, or very little relationship, to the subject of the first film; it is entirely another matter to tell us in a film about *that very film* being made. It is one thing to present us with a character who is a director and who recalls only slightly, and only in some parts of the film, the maker of the real film; it is another matter for the director to make his hero into a director who is thinking of making a very similar film. (1991 [1971]: 230 – emphasis in the original)

By the light of these observations, even *Aprile* might be closer in spirit to *8½* than *Sweet Dreams*. In that fictional diary, Moretti feigned an inability to make a film about Italy's current political situation – while at the same time he was making it. *Mutatis mutandis*, Metz's words would perfectly describe *Aprile*: "Because the film that Guido wanted to make would have been a study of himself … it becomes confused with the film Fellini has made"

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[115] As Clodagh Brook points out, "Its positioning of Berlusconi within the narrative frame of the film-within-the-film enables Moretti to tackle issues of representation head on, and to avoid some of its pitfalls. It allows him to talk not only about Berlusconi, but also about *how* artists and intellectuals talk about this figure, and what obstacles to such talk there may be" (2009: 114).

[116] In chapter 3, I have outlined some of the basic features of *Sweet Dreams*, in the context of a discussion on self-representation in the cinema. I have also signalled some of the affinities between *Sweet Dreams* and *8½*, such as: the fact that the Moretti-like protagonist is a filmmaker struggling with creative obstacles; the fact that the film he is trying to make (within the story) centres on a character who resembles himself to an extent; the fact that some of the fictional characters in *Sweet Dreams* criticize the Moretti-like protagonist in terms that are eerily similar to the way Moretti himself had actually been criticized. See the sections titled "Biographical echoes and spectatorial engagement" and "The Allen manoeuvre".

(1991 [1971]: 230). Similarly, *The Caiman* is "the film of *The Caiman* being made," as Metz would put it:

> It is therefore not enough to speak of a "film within the film": *8½* is the film of *8½* being made, *the "film in the film" is, in this case, the film itself*. And of all the literary or cinematographic antecedents that have been mentioned in connection with Fellini's work, by far the most convincing … is André Gide's *Paludes*, since it is about a novelist writing *Paludes*. (Metz 1991 [1971]: 232 – emphasis in the original)

The Caiman comprises Bonomo and Teresa's versions of a film about Berlusconi, and at the same time points out their limitations and attempts to supersede them. The unity of Moretti's film lies in its internal fragmentation, that is, in the dialectical relationship between the several versions of the movie on Berlusconi we are successively presented with. Furthermore, these multiple stagings are accompanied by a refraction of the very figure of the director into several characters, so that the forces pulling in different directions – the different stances, schematically presented in the aforementioned dialogue in the car – find expression both in the multiplication of Morettian surrogates and in the *The Caiman*'s very form.

The first way Berlusconi's story is staged presents "Il caimano" as imagined by Bonomo. The clips are abruptly introduced, and only retrospectively do we realize we are watching the story through the protagonist's mind's eye, rather than events "actually" occurring within the fictional diegesis of the larger *The Caiman*. However, such scenes immediately look and sound very different from the overall picture they are a part of. In this staging, "Il caimano" is a straightforward denunciation of Berlusconi's shady deals set in expository mode, with dialogue that has no other function than to present the magnate's crimes: tax evasion, money laundering, buying off of state bureaucrats. As Clodagh Brook puts it, this is a biopic "centred on the key question, 'Where did he get his money?'", thus "providing audiences with key moments in Berlusconi's biography" (2009: 115). It relies heavily on voice-over narration; and, like a cartoon villain, the title-character openly describes his tactics: "Next year there will be a general

election, and this time our group will be directly involved … All must lend a hand: our TV channels, our stars, our newspapers … The only solution is a new political force, headed by me." He is challenged by the proverbial valiant journalist, who tells him: "You are only doing this because you're 5,000 billion lire in debt, and the judges are closing in on your foreign bank accounts. You want to enter politics because otherwise you'd go to jail." Elio de Capitani, the actor embodying Berlusconi in this staging, has some physical resemblance to the model, playing "a likeness of the Premier, complete with Milanese accent, Berlusconi's gesturality and smile," as Brook points out (2009: 115).

This first staging is therefore both a pointed denunciation of the Italian magnate's crimes *and* – presumably – the film Moretti *did not* want to make, for the reasons his fictional double articulated in the dialogue in the car.[117] In Brook's reading, it is "a decoy", "a caricature of Berlusconi, one whose ridiculousness makes us laugh" (2009: 115):

> In *Il caimano* the comic hyperbole of outsize suitcases, a giant football, and showgirls' bottoms is rejected as representation. Five years of satirical derision had not succeeded in undermining Berlusconi's power base. Moretti believes that a different approach is necessary. (Brook 2009: 116)

The pitfalls of the project are ironically hinted at in *The Caiman* in multiple ways. When Teresa and Bonomo try to sell the idea to a bureaucrat in charge of RAI, the latter squarely dismisses it: "That's not a film: that's public knowledge." This fictional brush-off echoes Moretti's actual impression that denouncing Berlusconi's crimes had in a sense become irrelevant, in that people had grown so accustomed to his tricks that every accusation, however serious, was now met with indifference. Denunciation had been hollowed out through repetition. Berlusconi himself had become adept at playing his farcical side to his own advantage. Indeed, upon the release of Moretti's film, that is just what the Italian Premier did: he "immediately referred to himself ("with irony") as the Caiman, and laughingly said that he would eat the opposition" (Brook 2009: 112).

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[117] Cremonini makes this point: "I numerosi flash della parte iniziale (le forme in cui Bruno immagina il suo Berlusconi) possono anche trarre in inganno e minacciare di essere loro il film su Berlusconi che tutti si aspettano, mentre sono proprio ciò che non si deve fare" (2006: 4).

While it does not depict an actual event, the conversation with the public TV official speaks to actuality in yet another manner. For *The Caiman*, for the first time, Moretti chose not to submit his film for co-production with RAI, because, he says, he feared compromising his creative freedom.[118] The fictional dialogue therefore hints at his concern that, should he have applied for funding, he *might* have been rejected on account of the political subject matter.[119] Speculating on the reasons why a film on Berlusconi had never been made, Moretti says in an interview:

> If you want to make a movie, the funding comes from television, and in Italy it's either RAI or Berlusconi's channels, so they might not be interested … I don't like to talk about censorship, but I think many directors or actors do censor themselves. They didn't even try to do it all these years. (Booth 2006)

The first version of "Il caimano" showed us Teresa's script mostly through Bonomo's mind-eye. The second staging, instead, represents their first attempt to "actually" shoot the film (in the story); therefore it has a different actor in the title-role, the fictional Marco Pulici (played by Michele Placido).[120] This means we have three embodiments of Berlusconi so far: the actual Premier (twice included in *The Caiman* via clips of television footage), the one Teresa wrote, and the one Bonomo and Teresa cast. Bonomo thinks Pulici "is perfect for the part," a compliment that seems to be intended in earnest but is clearly double-edged, for in due time the actor's egomania, dishonesty, vulgarity, cowardice, and ludicrous sexual obsessions will be

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[118] Moretti adds that a crucial advantage of having his own production company is the freedom this gives him to find the backers he wants. For that reason, he has never applied for funding by Berlusconi's TV channels, even before the Italian tycoon entered into politics. "Visto il tema del film, per rimanere indipendenti, abbiamo deciso per la prima volta di non chiedere un finanziamento alla Rai. Del resto uno dei motivi che mi ha spinto a diventare produttore è quello di poter scegliere io da chi farmi finanziare i film: per questo, da quando esiste la Sacher, con Mediaset e Medusa per principio non abbiamo mai voluto lavorare" (Radman 2005).

[119] "J'ignore si la Rai aurait accepté de coproduire *Le Caïman*, car je n'ai même pas essayé de demander son aide. Et je n'en parle pas comme un fait positif, au contraire: cela montre que quelque chose ne va pas. Ça veut dire que je me suis laissé moi aussi conditionner par des discours purement italiens. En Angleterre l'Etat finance des spectacles théâtraux férocement opposés au gouvernement" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 208).

[120] The fictive name Marco Pulici could perhaps be taken as an allusion to "Mani Pulite," the judicial investigation into political corruption which in the 1990s brought to an end the two main Italian parties of government, with whom Berlusconi had close ties.

exposed.[121] Not by accident, Pulici likes Berlusconi: he describes the caiman as “self-made,” “something new,” and believes the Italian Premier deserves to be portrayed in a “fascinating” manner. In the end, however, fearful of the possible consequences of taking part in an anti-Berlusconi yarn, Pulici abandons the project, preferring to star in a costume drama titled “The Return of Christopher Columbus”.

Again, this turn of events is meant to comment on actuality: in Brook’s plausible estimation, “the actor’s betrayal is a dig, on Moretti’s part, at the lack of political commitment in mainstream Italian cinema … [its] evasion of current political events” (2009: 116). That Moretti was keen on sending a message aimed at the Italian film industry is also evident in the inclusion of a wide variety of filmmakers in minor acting roles. The director has said so himself: “It’s as if for a film on Berlusconi that no one wanted to make, I wanted my colleagues to be near me, for solidarity.”[122]

More profound in its implications is the idea that this second staging speaks to the difficulties involved in making a film with such a nasty figure at its centre. “How do you make a film about a character you want to criticize without making your protagonist too human and too likable?”, Brook asks (2009: 116). In the story, both Pulici and Bonomo claim the caiman must not be depicted in overly negative terms, for the spectators need a protagonist they can relate to. According to Brook, the same reasoning could explain Moretti’s *actual* decision to frame Berlusconi’s story within another story, thereby making the film producer Bonomo – not the Italian tycoon – the emotional anchor of *The Caiman*.

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[121] Bonomo’s remark could be taken as ironic on yet another level: Michele Placido, the actor who plays Pulici, rose to fame in the 1980s for his role as a heroic police inspector fighting the Mafia in the TV series *La piovra* (*The Octopus*, 1984-1989). Placido has also a long and distinguished directorial career, which includes the highly acclaimed *Romanzo criminale* (2005), a story about one of the most powerful Italian criminal cartels of the 1970s and 1980s.

[122] “An interview with Nanni Moretti”, *Italy Magazine*, March 12, 2008. Besides the aforementioned Placido and Mazzacurati, *The Caiman* includes Paolo Sorrentino (*Il divo*, 2008; *The Great Beauty*, 2013), Matteo Garrone (*Gomorrah*, 2008; *Dogman*, 2018), Antonello Grimaldi (*Quiet Chaos*, 2008), Paolo Virzi (*Human Capital*, 2013), Giuliano Montaldo (*Sacco & Vanzetti*, 1971; *Time to Kill*, 1989), and Stefano Rulli (screenwriter of *The Best of Youth*, 2003; *The Young Pope*, 2016).

Bonomo is indisputably a relatable figure. His devotion to his family is sincere, and even his ineptitude is winsome. Throughout the film, Orlando adeptly plays the sad puppy face. There might be a flip side to this agreeableness, however, in the way Bonomo so easily adapts to the vices of Italian society, and indeed to his own. In De Bernardinis' estimation, the character's main vice resides in his perfect commonality: this film producer manqué, who is politically indifferent and even admits to having voted for Berlusconi in the past, is Berlusconianism with a human face. The critic sees the character through the prism of the *commedia all'italiana*, a genre about which Moretti has always been severely critical:

> The actor's bonhomie, his commonplace naiveté, his very niceness … lead the audience … *first* to acquit him of any charges, and *then* … to a prompt and deliberate self-acquittal. That is precisely the function [Alberto] Sordi, [Nino] Manfredi, and [Vittorio] Gassman performed in the traditional *commedia all'italiana*. The Italian spectator recognizes himself in the figure on the screen, and takes to this buffoonish, charming, human all too human character, instinctively casting aside any ethical or moral qualms. (De Bernardinis 2006: 188)[123]

According to this reading, Bonomo performs for the audience the same self-cleansing function, inspires the very self-complacency Moretti has always deplored. The figure on the screen comforts and reassures the audience in its own worst traits.

The affable protagonist of *The Caiman* is therefore a sort of a double of the Italian Premier, De Bernardinis argues: each of them only acquires its full significance in the story in conjunction with the other. The film producer and the Italian plutocrat are polar opposites – one a guileless loser, the other a self-made man – but the millionaire is also the man Bonomo's dreams are made of:[124]

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[123] "La bonomia dell'interprete, la sua istituzionale innocenza, la simpatia, insomma, … conducono chi segue il film … ad una sentenza *prima* di assoluzione, e *dopo* … di pronta e avvertita autoassoluzione. Esattamente il sentimento innescato dai vari Sordi, Manfredi, Gassman nella commedia italiana classica. L'italiano si vede, simpatizza con l'immagine bonaria, gaglioffa, ma umana troppo umana di sé stesso, e chiude istintivamente i conti dell'etica e i giudizi della morale."

[124] "La figura dell'imprenditore di successo è ciò che Bruno non è mai stato, e desidererebbe senza dubbio diventare" (De Bernardinis 2006: 190).

> The oneiric, interlocking structure of the movie-within-the-movie stages the hapless Bruno's *sweet dreams*, that is, the dreams of any little man, any ordinary citizen of contemporary Italy. The image of the successful businessman is for him … a *double* on whom he can project all his desires and ambitions.[125]

It is therefore no accident, De Bernardinis notes, that the first staging of "Il caimano" emerges not just from Teresa's script, but literally out of Bonomo's dreams: as the film producer is about to go to sleep, alone in his office, he starts flipping through the pages of the script Teresa had handed to him, and that is how the first clips of "Il caimano" are introduced.[126] In the following scenes, the title-character is surrounded by money, fame, and scantily clad women – a lifestyle Bonomo would presumably find enticing. By contrast, the segments of the same staging that are introduced by Teresa's retelling of the story later on – when she has to explain to Bonomo the meaning of the tale – dwell on Berlusconi's financial misdeeds, portraying a much less glamorous side of the Italian plutocrat. To reinforce this reading, I would point out that the poster the fictional film producer has on the wall behind his desk, at the office, is the one for Elia Kazan's *The Last Tycoon* (1976). Bonomo lives his thwarted ambitions vicariously.

Once Marco Pulici's pusillanimity frustrates Teresa and Bonomo's plans, the ambition to make a film about Berlusconi folds. However, Moretti's film does not end there, as Bonomo decides to shoot just one scene – the climactic one – of a movie that will never be made. When this happens, the director of *The Caiman* enters the film within the film, "Moretti" taking up the title-role in "Il caimano". As if to echo Moretti's *actual* decision to shoot a film he had on various occasions deemed too risky, the director's alter ego (in the story) now accepts the part he had previously rejected. The transition is

[125] "La struttura a incastro, onirica, mette in scena i *sogni d'oro* del povero Bruno, ovvero i sogni di un ometto qualsiasi, cittadino dell'Italia contemporanea. La figura dell'imprenditore di successo, per Bruno che confessa candidamente di aver votato il partito politico chiamato 'Forza Italia', è il *doppio* su cui proiettare tutti i desideri e tutte le ambizioni" (De Bernardinis 2006: 190).

[126] "Bruno, nelle notti solitarie, in branda, in ufficio, spulcia il copione, dal titolo *Il caimano*. Si addormenta e lo sogna" (De Bernardinis 2006: 184).

sudden and abrupt, and "Moretti" does not offer the slightest explanation for his change of heart.

The absence of a plausible narrative motivation for this decision leads De Bernardinis (2006: 187-188) to speculate that the few final minutes of *The Caiman* could have a different diegetic status from the rest of the film. No clear boundary markers indicate we have entered a dream – but then again, Moretti hardly ever employs clear boundary markers to introduce dreams; much to the contrary, in *Ecce bombo* he explicitly pokes fun at such conventions.[127] In story terms, Bonomo's decision to shoot a single sequence of a film he knows he will never be able to complete is insufficiently motivated, which seems to give credence to De Bernardinis' hypothesis.[128]

Another affinity between *The Caiman* and *8½* emerges here: at the end of Fellini's film, the fictional protagonist similarly realizes he will not be able to make the film he had been planning, and it is this renunciation which, paradoxically, enables him to complete it. Guido had been vainly trying to assemble all the disparate elements in his life into a coherent story. Once he accepts this cannot be done, the very same elements can now freely enter his film, for the film will be made precisely of this disorganized mess. Metz describes:

> Therefore the film will be made; it will have no central message, and … it will be made out of the very confusion of life … It will be a film woven from the life of its author and possessing the disorder of his life. (1991 [1971]: 233)

When this occurs, another fundamental transformation takes place: Guido enters his own film, just as Moretti does when he takes up the leading role in "Il caimano". "This author who dreamed of making *8½* is now one of the characters of *8½*," Metz writes (1991 [1971]: 233) – a statement that could apply to Moretti.

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[127] I have alluded to this scene in chapter 4, in the section titled: "*Ecce bombo* as art cinema – and its parody".

[128] "Gli ultimi dieci minuti del film … se colorano di una tonalità evidentemente *onirica*. … Non si sa come. I soldi per completare la pellicola non ci sono, i finanziatori se ne sono andati, gli interpreti hanno ingranato la retro marcia. Eppure, al di fuori di ogni verosimiglianza nella trama e nell'intreccio, non si sa come, per magia, *come in un sogno*, l'azione attacca davvero" (De Bernardinis 2006: 187-188).

The final sequence of this third version of "Il caimano" depicts Berlusconi's final session in court. The dictum "All citizens are equal before the law" is engraved in huge letters on the wall, as is customary in Italian courthouses, but the caiman (now embodied by Moretti) insists that the opinions of the majority must take precedence. The judges convict him to seven years in prison, but he denounces the verdict as politically motivated, and invites the people to disobey. He is then cheered as he exits the court, whereas the judges are attacked and forced to flee. In the final shot, "Moretti"/Berlusconi leaves in a car, his face progressively obscured, erased, reduced to a silhouette, while in the background Molotov cocktails explode. The finale of "Il caimano" – which is also the last scene in Moretti's *The Caiman* – is staged with dark lighting, emphatic music, and fire raging in the background: it looks nothing short of apocalyptic.

The surprise effect in casting Moretti as Berlusconi can hardly be overstated: it is "a coup de theatre," to borrow De Bernardinis' expression (2006: 185). Not only is there not the faintest physical resemblance between the Italian Premier and the filmmaker, but the latter's oppositional stance is widely known, an integral part of his public *persona*. The surprise of this last-minute appearance is reinforced by the fact that, prior to the film's release, it had been divulged that – a first in his directorial career – Moretti would not play the lead acting part in his new film.

In fact, the *dissimilarity* between the two figures plays a crucial narrative function: in this third staging of "Il caimano" "the simulacrum of Berlusconi is dismissed … Moretti does not *act* Berlusconi at all" (Brook 2009: 117). Meanwhile, Moretti also does not play "Moretti" in this segment: in stark contrast with his expansive performance in the earlier car scene, where he had parodied his own *persona* by talking and singing out loud at the same time, now he recites his lines coldly. He strips the Italian tycoon off his farcical outward features, as if to allow us to see clearly the sinister truth

beneath them.[129] The technique is strictly Brechtian: "Once the idea of total transformation is abandoned the actor speaks his part not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation," the German playwright had written (1964: 138). Moreover, the "in quote" technique is applied to literal "in quote" content, for the words "Moretti" says in the role are things Berlusconi has *actually* said.[130] The strikingly anti-naturalistic representation is thus combined with an element of documentary authenticity, as Brook describes:

> This finale is split between two modes of representation – real and allegorical apocalyptical – with the first coming to occupy the dialogue track and the second lodging in the visual field. While the visual field takes us into the world of apocalyptical movies and is dominated by images of fire and darkness as the law courts burn, the dialogue track is sewn together from various speeches which Berlusconi himself had made, and thus is based in documentary realism. (2009: 117)

The Brechtian idea comes out once more: the estrangement effect should allow us to see what we had become too accustomed to even notice anymore. In an interview, the director himself is entirely forthcoming about his intentions:

> What I liked about it was the surprise effect. I wanted there to be no resemblance, no attempt on my part to physically look like him. … I was trying to take the spectators aback, to play the role without making a caricature of Berlusconi, so as to convey the full gravity of what has actually happened over the course of these years.[131]

Furthermore, in a crucial, ironic twist, Moretti points out that, despite his well-known aversion to Berlusconi, the things he says in character

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[129] "The comic exterior and, almost literally, the body of Berlusconi is stripped away to reveal a ruthless politician who will stop at nothing" (Brook 2009: 117).

[130] This is a point the director often underscores in interviews: "Les phrases que je dis dans les escaliers du tribunal, quand [Berlusconi] s'en prend à la magistrature et qu'il parle de la 'caste' des magistrats, ce sont ses propres mots. Ce sont des phrases qu'il a enregistrées et qu'il a envoyées à toutes les télévisions il y a trois ans" (Gili 2017: 121).

[131] "Ce qui me plaisait avant tout, c'était l'effet de surprise; ensuite je voulais qu'il n'y ait aucune ressemblance, ni de tentative par l'interprétation de lui ressembler physiquement. … L'idée était d'effectuer un contre-pied et de jouer le rôle sans caricaturer le personnage de Berlusconi, en essayant de restituer au spectateur quelque chose de ce qui est arrivé pendant ces années et dont, peut-être, nous n'avons pas pleinement mesuré la gravité" (Gili 2017: 118-119).

to an extent resonate with views he himself had publicly expressed.[132] In keeping with another central Brechtian principle, therefore, the actor (Moretti) stays in the picture, in plain view, next to the role he embodies. The lines "Moretti" says can thus be taken to express *both* Berlusconi's mind and the director's. De Bernardinis puts it thus: "As in an ancient, tribal rite, the enemy is confronted, defeated, and incorporated" (2006: 186).[133] But the question is: who defeats whom?

The swamp, or: Is this an Alberto Sordi movie?

I have signalled earlier that the narrative of *The Caiman* is built upon two parallel threads, one dealing with the personal lives of the fictional characters, the other one with actual events. The two strands are connected via Bruno and Teresa's project of making "Il caimano", but the political events as such barely impact on the characters' personal lives. There is, additionally, a conspicuous contrast in tone between the soft, rather agreeable denouement of affairs in the personal sphere of *The Caiman* and the apocalyptic guise that takes over the film in its closing, more political segment.

Such a discrepancy could perhaps be taken to imply that the personal *is not* always the political: the two strands diverge because those two aspects of life do not always go hand in hand. Against such a reading, however, De Bernardinis proposes that a "structural nexus" links the third and final staging of "Il caimano" to all that precedes it in *The Caiman* (including Bonomo's personal story). According to this interpretation, the final few minutes turn the entire film on its head, as a nightmare: Moretti's (Brechtian) goal is to jolt the audience out of its slumber.[134] Here is De Bernardinis:

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[132] For Moretti's full quote, in an interview with the French critic Jean A. Gili (2017: 121-122), see my previous chapter, in the section titled "The way you speak".

[133] "Il nemico, come in un rito arcaico e tribale, va affrontato, sconfitto e incorporato" (De Bernardinis 2006: 186).

[134] "Gli ultimi dieci minuti costituiscono il terribile sogno de *Il Caimano* … quel sogno nelle cui spire gli italiani tutti si sono addormentati e assuefatti" (De Bernardinis 2006: 188).

> The irruption of Moretti as caiman takes off the mask to the previous 95 minutes of film. [Teresa's] command "Action!" … reveals that all the dreams were in fact part of a single, unspeakable nightmare.[135]

The critic's observation reverberates Moretti's statement, at a public rally in 2002: "Italians voted for Berlusconi in the pursuit of a dream, and they found themselves in a nightmare."[136]

To support his analysis, De Bernardinis points to the coexistence of contrasting film textures in *The Caiman*, not just in the juxtaposition of several films-within-the-film, but within the film's main diegesis itself.[137] He underscores the oddity – nay, the ugliness – of some hackneyed melodramatic motifs, such as those relating to Paola and Bruno's divorce, especially when considered in the context of Moretti's oeuvre.[138] The critic makes sense of the banality of the personal thread – the way it at some points seems to resemble the aesthetics and plot of a humdrum TV drama – by finding its second-level coherence with Moretti's project. He reads the mellow guise of *The Caiman*, in hindsight, as an embellished lie, and argues that, if we have been successfully lulled, the ending of the film is bound to hit us all the more starkly, with the full force of a shock and a revelation – precisely the twin central features of the apocalypse.[139] The critic's interpretation is a perfect illustration of one of the central strategies authorism pursues to make sense

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[135] "L'irruzione di Moretti/Caimano fa cadere la maschera ai 95 minuti di film fin lì proiettati. La parola 'Azione!' … svela che tutti i sogni, in realtà, facevano parte di un unico, impronunciabile incubo" (De Bernardinis 2006: 192).

[136] In 2002 Moretti was politically very active at the head of a movement in defence of the Constitution that was known as the Girotondi. This culminated in a large public rally on the Piazza San Giovanni, in Rome, on September 14th 2002, where Moretti gave the central speech: "Gli italiani hanno votato Berlusconi inseguendo un sogno e si sono risvegliati in un incubo!" (De Bernardinis 2006: 19).

[137] "A costo di accedere alla dimensione pop del fumetto, Arnaldo Catinari, che per la prima volta collabora con Nanni Moretti, riesce nel piccolo miracolo di convincere l'autarchico a rinunciare al solito ricorso a una fotografia 'impeccabile'. La luce de *Il caimano* è sempre o troppa, o troppo poca, e i personaggi man mano la cercano o la scansano" (De Bernardinis 2006: 197).

[138] De Bernardinis (2006: 189) enumerates several scenes, to then conclude: "Il genere della farsa spiegherebbe … la presenza dei *luoghi comuni* già individuati, la scena del maglione strappato, il concerto all'Auditorium, certe concessioni molto dirette al comico e al ridicolo. Tutto questo *cattivo cinema* ha luogo perché parte integrante di un mondo alle soglie della fine del mondo" (2006: 195).

[139] "Tutto il film precedente i dieci minuti finali, così, si tinge del nero di pece dell'incubo in cui gli italiani, senza rendersene conto (e senza, soprattutto, chiederne conto) ristagnano e annaspano. Non è facile, per lo spettatore, anche il più avvertito, cogliere immediatamente il nesso strutturale. Innanzitutto è possibile recuperarlo appieno solo retroattivamente, una volta finito il film, dopo che Moretti/Caimano ha sbaragliato il campo e la scena. Anche perché la parte 'intima', privata', la crisi coniugale di Bruno e Paola assomiglia molto al cinema 'due camere e cucina' che Moretti spesso ha inteso stigmatizzare" (De Bernardinis 2006: 188).

of any perceived unevenness in an author's output, finding its coherence at a deeper level.[140] A critic of a different leaning might be tempted to read the film's ugliness as a simple defect: this was indeed the position taken by Enrico Ghezzi, who declared Moretti guilty of the very sins he purported to deplore.[141]

If De Bernardinis's interpretation holds, however, it is not just Bonomo, in his civic apathy, who belongs in Berlusconi's world, but so do all of the other characters of *The Caiman*, including Teresa, the left-wing director who wants to make an oppositional film to reveal yet again what has been laid bare a million times, and even "Moretti", the star who has no time for political cinema and much prefers to make yet another comedy.[142] This might also account for "Moretti's" surprising decision to enter a film he had previously rejected. "There is this terrifying dread: that this may *really* be the age of Silvio Berlusconi," De Bernardinis writes, "and that *even* Nanni Moretti himself may have no choice but to be a part of it."[143]

Again, this echoes *8½*, although *a contrario*: Metz had pointed out that, when Guido enters his own film, "The place of the director, which is now empty, can only be occupied by a character external to the action of the film. By Fellini himself" (1991 [1971]: 234). The French theorist had noted that *8½* comes to a close when Fellini's film and Guido's finally differentiate themselves, the fictional filmmaker becoming just another character in Fellini's story. In stark contrast to this, when Moretti enters the frame of "Il caimano", *The Caiman* and the film within it ("Il caimano") perfectly fuse, so that the final image of Teresa's film is also the final one in Moretti's: we have

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[140] Foucault underscores this as a central feature of the author-function: see my discussion of his ideas in chapter 1 (above), namely in the section titled ""Authorship and the oeuvre".

[141] In an interview at the time of the film's release, Ghezzi said: "Although it pretends to express its strenuous resistance to Berlusconi's vulgarity, *The Caiman* is the very proof that that kind of television and that kind of aesthetics have definitely won." "*Il Caimano*, pur volendo essere una strenua resistenza alla volgarità berlusconiana, è invece a sua volta la dimostrazione che quella tv e quella forma hanno vinto" (Conti 2006).

[142] "Nanni Moretti, alla richiesta di Bruno e Teresa di interpretare il ruolo del caimano nel film omonimo, risponde da 'intellettuale' consapevole e superiore, e da 'regista' che non intende sporcarsi le mani" (De Bernardinis 2006: 191).

[143] "Il terrore, insomma, che questa sia *davvero* l'età di Silvio Berlusconi, di cui *anche* Nanni Moretti non può che essere parte" (De Bernardinis 2006: 195).

no external frame to return to. Following Metz's reasoning, we might conclude that, when Moretti becomes a character in "Il caimano", the place of the director in his film becomes empty.

Metaphorically, that could be what the film is hinting at: by making a film about Berlusconi, Moretti is permanently in danger of becoming just another character in someone else's story. The question for the *real* Moretti is then the one his fictional alter ego had articulated in the dialogue with Bruno and Teresa in the car: how do you criticize Berlusconi without being sucked back into *his* world, without becoming just another character in *his* story?

We could also rephrase the problem in terms of *Ecce bombo*'s famous dictum: *But where are we? Is this a Berlusconi movie?* If the family resemblance suggested by De Bernardinis between the likeable protagonist of *The Caiman* and the heroes of the *commedia all'italiana* holds, then Berlusconi's Italy is indeed an *Alberto Sordi type of story*, a country where an every-man-for-himself mentality thrives, where a complete indifference towards ethical or legal values prevails. Indeed, the *Ecce bombo* banner carried by the anti-Berlusconi protestors in 1994 already seemed to imply as much.[144]

The idea that, more than a simple politician, Berlusconi might be the signifier for an entire historical era is hinted at multiple times in *The Caiman*. In the meeting with the RAI bureaucrat, Bonomo tries to make the project more palatable by suggesting the film they are trying to make is not strictly about the Italian plutocrat: "'Il caimano' is broader: it is a film about power, about what we have become – about Italy." To this, Teresa retorts: "But the Italy of the past thirty years *is* Berlusconi!" In the conversation in the car with "Moretti", as she faces his resistance, Teresa admonishes him: "If we don't make this film, Berlusconi will win once more." "Moretti", however, is unimpressed: "He has already won," he contends. "Twenty, thirty years ago, with his TV channels, he managed to change the way we think." The (fictional) Polish film producer Jerzy Sturovsky (Jerzy Stuhr) puts it in the

[144] See the introduction to Chapter 4 (above).

cruellest of terms, in a resigned but amused tone. He leisurely swims alongside Bruno in a pool and praises the idea of making a film about "your *Italietta*" in the following manner:

> You're so funny, so ridiculous … You are a people halfway between horror and folklore. You've grown used to your own sleaze. And each time we think you've touched the bottom, in fact you haven't: you continue to dig… and dig… and dig… and you slip ever deeper. Further down, you scrape.

In the end, the title of Moretti's film might not be simply a sardonic, indirect way of referring to the Italian Premier, but a rather more polysemic term, the name of a widespread phenomenon. De Bernardinis notes that the publicity poster for the film is drawn precisely from the scene where Bonomo swims with Sturovsky, and it pointedly does *not* include Berlusconi's face.[145] Brook describes:

> This poster, on which the words "Il caimano" are etched in a bold red typeface, shows not Berlusconi emerging, reptilian, from Italy's waters, but Bruno Bonomo's head bobbing up from a swimming pool. Bruno, whose smooth head with its dark-slicked back hair bears a resemblance to Berlusconi, is caiman too. … Moretti uses Bonomo to present Berlusconi not as a hyperbolic anomaly which appears from nowhere, a two-dimensional character who is fundamentally "different to us", but as ever-present in the society and in the heads of Italians. (2009: 118-119)

Eight years prior, in an interview given on the occasion of *Aprile*'s release, Moretti had hinted that to portray actual political events in a straightforward narrative drama risked achieving nothing but an impoverished facsimile of reality.[146] With *The Caiman*, he tried to perform yet another twist on political cinema, a genre he has wrestled with through his entire career. "I believe I managed to be severely critical of Berlusconi, while not putting an undue emphasis on his most ludicrous aspects," the director

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[145] "Curiosa, ed esemplare, la scelta della locandina del film, la faccia di Silvio Orlando, umida di piscina, che affiora dal bordo di una vasca, con il titolo *Il caimano* sospeso sulla testa" (De Bernardinis 2006: 187).

[146] "Si j'avais raconté l'histoire de ces dernières années avec des bons acteurs, un scénario classique, des personnages de fiction, cela aurait donné quelque chose de beaucoup moins fort que la réalité. Alors que l'aspect le plus intéressant de mon travail consiste justement à trouver, à chaque fois, un nouveau mode narratif, une manière de raconter qui soit la plus juste par rapport à l'idée que j'ai en tête" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 53).

said. "I did not want to make a sort of a jesting movie that people would want to see for Christmas."[147] Again, there are clear echoes of Brecht in this idea. The German playwright had written:

> [We are in the] general habit of judging works of art by their suitability for the apparatus ... People say, this or that is a good work; and they mean (but do not say) good for the apparatus. Yet this apparatus is conditioned by the society of the day and only accepts what can keep it going in that society. We are free to discuss any innovation which doesn't threaten its social function - that of providing an evening's entertainment. (Brecht 1964: 34)

Conclusion

On the face of it, the grouping of *Dear Diary*, *Aprile* and *The Caiman* in a single chapter is counter-intuitive: while the first two, diaristic films are usually perceived in a naturalistic key (as quasi-non-fictions), *The Caiman* comes in the guise of an almost straightforward narrative drama. Against this, I decided to underscore what these three films have in common – the staging of a character who goes by the actual name of the filmmaker – so as to try to figure out what we should make of the affinities between the figure on the screen and the real-life Moretti. My analysis of these three films has tried to show that in all of them the director's self-depiction is filtered through similar aesthetic frameworks to the ones with which Moretti worked at earlier stages of his oeuvre – particularly through a close engagement with Brecht.

But while Brechtianism and art cinema narration seem to be fruitful blueprints for making sense of what happens in these films, my analysis has also consistently detected a paradox in the way the films integrate elements of actuality. Characters' names which coincide with actors' names, biographical matches between Moretti and the fictional figures he embodies, locations and props taken up from his actual life, and so forth, sometimes discredit the pretence that the story constitutes a coherent, life-like world (in Brechtian fashion), while at other times seem to reinforce (anti-Brechtian) verisimilitude.

[147] "Je pense avoir critiqué durement Berlusconi mais en évitant son aspect le plus folklorique car je n'avais pas envie de faire un film de blagues qui serait sorti à Noël" (Gili 2017: 121).

On the one hand, Moretti's films evince a quasi-documentarian ambition to show aspects of the real world, which translates in a preference for actual locations over sets, representation of time in its actual duration, inclusion of non-professional actors, and more; on the other, they display a concurrent tendency to flaunt artificiality, to remind spectators that the film is *not* a piece of real life, not a naturalistic imitation of the world as it exists. Even in the purportedly diaristic films, this is once more evident, in ways I signalled above.

This tension between "objective realism" (of the art cinema variety) and Brechtianism also translates in the director's statements: often he deplores a tendency to equate the protagonist of his pictures with himself, but on other occasions it is he who establishes a direct link between the features of the protagonist and his own personal characteristics. Particularly around the time of the release of *The Son's Room*, Moretti was insistent on the idea that the fictional protagonist of this film was different from earlier ones because he – personally – had changed: "I am glad I've waited. … Time and life have made sure that I would not play a character similar to that of the priest of *The Mass is Ended* or the filmmaker of *Sweet Dreams*."[148] In another interview, he stated: "If I have changed as a director, it is that I have changed as a person."[149]

In his extracinematic comments, Moretti has associated the idea of maturity with moving off centre-stage and opening up room for others – in the fictional narratives of his films as well as in his personal life. It is a shift which comes out clearly in "Chapter Two" of *Dear Diary*, an episode where much of the story turns around the opinions and concerns of the fictional Gerardo (Renato Carpentieri), while the Moretti-like protagonist is mostly just an observer. In the same vein, Moretti compares, in an interview, two roles played by Laura Morante in films from different periods of his oeuvre: "[In *The Son's Room*] I wanted her to have more autonomy … In *Bianca*, she was a projection of my character's fantasies, whereas here she offers her own perspective on

[148] "Je suis très heureux d'avoir attendu. … Le temps et la vie ont fait que je n'ai pas reproposé l'équivalent du prêtre de *La Messe est Finie* ou du cinéaste de *Sogni d'oro*" (Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 177).
[149] "Si j'ai changé comme réalisateur, c'est que j'ai changé comme personne" (Codelli 2001: 8).

events."[150] In conversation with the filmmaker (on the occasion of the release of *Aprile*), the critics Nicolas Saada and Serge Toubiana directly link this transformation – the creation of roles that are not merely there for the sake of establishing opposition to the protagonist – to the fact that Moretti has become a father (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 58). As I have previously pointed out, the very logo of Moretti's production company intimates a change in his *persona* by the inclusion of a child perched on his back. Moretti agrees with the suggestion, even if in his view this process started years earlier, with *Palombella rossa* and *Dear Diary*, two films that long precede the birth of his son. The fact that from *The Caiman* onwards Moretti no longer plays the protagonists of his films, but appears in supporting roles instead, seems to offer further confirmation of this development.

My point is of course not to deny that Moretti has matured, or to dismiss the idea that the films may in some sense reflect that: artworks are inextricably linked to the human beings who create them, and comparing them with the biographical circumstances and the ideas of their authors is often instructive, as I have insistently argued in Part One of this dissertation. Still, the notion that characters in fictional stories would directly mirror the psychological qualities of their creators (of the actors who embody them, or of the screenwriters and directors who conceive them) risks obscuring the fact that a film is a result of stylistic and narrative *choices*. Moretti's films, including the particular features of their protagonists and the kind of engagement these invite in the audience, have to be thought of as an aesthetic project. It is one thing to view the biographical angle as being pertinent to the understanding of the oeuvre, something else to imagine that the films squarely reflect what happens in the filmmaker's life, or offer us a direct glimpse of his personality. The second kind of reading needs to be resisted – *even when the director himself proposes it*.

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[150] Before *Bianca*, Morante had already featured in *Sweet Dreams*, where her character (Silvia) was literally a projection of Michele's fantasies, since she only existed in the segment of the story formed by the protagonist's nightmares. "J'avais envie que Laura Morante ait son autonomie … Dans *Bianca*, elle était une projection des fantasmes de mon personnage, ici elle donne pour elle-même une autre vision des événements du film" (Joyard and Larcher 2001: 20).

In fact, if we read the filmmaker's extracinematic remarks by the light of his own work, an ironic element crops up. The aspects Moretti underscores in earnest in interviews are sometimes precisely the same ones his films address in jest.[151] A scene at the close of *Sweet Dreams* casts doubt on the sincerity of directorial statements, when the fictional filmmaker Michele Apicella personally salutes every single one of the newspaper critics who have come to watch the screening of his new film by repeating to each of them: "It's my best film so far." The mechanical repetition of the phrase, in addition to all we have seen of Michele Apicella by this point in the film, implies he is just trying to promote his film as best he can. But if this is the case, then what does it imply about the real-life Moretti and *his* comments on his own work? In *Aprile*, the theme of personal maturation, which is so present in Moretti's interviews, crops up in a mocking and teasing manner. In a paused, lofty, professorial tone, the protagonist refers to himself in the third person, giving an account of his own development, as if it was a psychologist talking of the growth stages of a baby:

> At first, Nanni found it hard. He didn't understand why his son wanted to be with his mother and not with the dad. The admirable thing about *him* was the process by which he tried to become an adult. … After all, the child's demands came first. In this way, he was beginning to learn to be less self-oriented. He started to think of the child, finally taking up the challenge of the man who must become an adult.
> But why become an adult? There's no point!

That those films where Moretti plays a character under his own name should confirm the centrality of the biographical angle is probably unsurprising: no wonder that, in order to make sense of the Moretti-looking figure in *Dear Diary*, *Aprile*, and *The Caiman*, we need to mobilize what we know about the real-life filmmaker. But what these films also bring home, when examined closely, is that what we know about the real-life Moretti (his biographical circumstances and opinions) is not enough to make sure we understand the meaning of similar events and opinions when they occur within a narrative

[151] I have pointed this out in chapter 4, in the section on "*Ecce Bombo* as art cinema – and its parody".

fiction. We may know what Moretti thinks of Berlusconi, for instance, or about the idea of making a film on the Italian magnate, because he has spoken about these things in interviews; and yet, if we are to appraise what his character in *The Caiman* has to say on these topics, we have no alternative but to look closely at the film itself, with an appreciation for the way concurrent ideas are staged and various characters, embodying different viewpoints, interact. *The Caiman* offers a nuanced illustration of the myriad problems and paradoxes involved in the project of making a film on Berlusconi which cannot be subsumed into, or replaced by, what the director says in interviews.

As I have signalled at various points throughout this dissertation, Moretti displays a paradoxical tendency, in interviews, to refer to the fictional protagonists of his films in the first person, while at the same protesting that the characters are *not* him. I believe this contradiction, which emerges repeatedly across many years or even decades, needs to be read as something other than a slip. Moretti plays a sort of Schrödinger's cat game, to the effect that the character on the screen *is and isn't him* at the same time, because the views and behaviours the character embodies very often coincide with Moretti's own views and behaviours, and yet the film (that Moretti himself authored) often casts them in a critical light. This principle applies to the films where Moretti plays "Moretti" in a way that is not fundamentally different from how it operates in those where he plays Michele Apicella. I am therefore inclined to taking the director at his word when he declares – in a statement I have included as an epigraph to chapter 3 (above) – that the insertion of autobiographical elements serves the purpose not of creating an identity between himself and the figure on the screen, but rather to interpose a distance between Moretti and *himself*. It is this Schrödinger's cat game – the fact that the Moretti on the screen often looks exactly like the real-life Moretti, and yet the two are not the same for the character is cast under the special light of the narrative in which he is enclosed – is what, in my view, accounts for the particular insight Moretti's oeuvre brings to our understanding of self-representation in the cinema.

Conclusions

> I stopped taking part in TV debates years ago, because one always ends up playing a character, whether one likes it or not. I like to play a role, but only in my own films, when it is up to me to decide how to set the tone of my voice, whether it is off-screen or on-, how to frame the scene … It might be argued that I also speak about personal matters in my films – except that, in those cases, I get to decide how I speak of them: in what style, with what dialogues, in what tone.[1]
> (Moretti to Saada and Toubiana 1998: 60)

It is hard to say if my research was firstly prompted by an interest in Moretti's work, or whether my wish to investigate his films was itself a consequence of a prior, larger curiosity about self-representation in the cinema. Since practically every one of Moretti's films has a similar *persona* at its centre, they immediately raise the question of how to connect such a figure with the actual filmmaker. One issue I've long been especially interested in was, how to relate the attitudes and opinions the character expresses with Moretti's own? Does the filmmaker believe the things his character says in films like *Ecce bombo*, *Palombella rossa*, or *Dear Diary*? My goal was never to find the real-life counterpart to the events depicted on the screen, but to determine *whether* and *how* we could ascertain a connection between the two. Some affinities between the figure on the screen and the filmmaker behind the camera are overt, but spectators also understand that the films are not to be taken as autobiographical documentaries. Even if we feel safe in the assumption that a match does exist between the Morettian protagonists and the actual filmmaker – even if this assumption proves to be correct in an empirical sense – how can we determine it?

[1] "Quant aux débats, je n'en fais plus depuis des années. Parce qu'on finit toujours par incarner involontairement un personnage. J'aime bien jouer un rôle, mais seulement dans mes films, quand je décide moi-même comment placer ma voix, quand elle est off ou in, ou quand je décide comment cadrer… Donner un interview, très bien… Mais incarner un personnage dans un débat, non… On pourrait me dire que je parle aussi de choses personnelles dans mes films. Sauf que c'est moi qui décide comment en parler, avec quel style, quel dialogue, quel ton" (Saada and Toubiana 1998: 60).

The analysis of Moretti's films thus went from the start hand in hand with theoretical preoccupations. By this I do not mean to imply that all of the aspects I consider in Part One are immediately applicable to Moretti's case. Theoretical discussions have their own pull, and in examining them I go into aspects which are not strictly speaking instrumental for making sense of Moretti's work. This dissertation is not merely a study of a set of films with a theoretical discussion attached; in outlining the debates about authorship and authorial intention, and in examining the pros and cons of biographically-inflected criticism, I am hoping to give the reader a sense of the issues at stake, which the reader may then apply to cases much beyond Moretti. In the end, my thesis may not offer an entirely novel understanding of the films; and perhaps the position I put forth in the debates about authorship, intention, and biographical criticism is not perfectly original. What my research strives to do is set the film analysis on sound theoretical premises, and also show how the films, interpreted this way, cast an instructive, perhaps original, light on the ways the biographical relates to the artwork.

I write in the hope that, by exploring the films in the light of the historical situation from which they arise, the aesthetic frameworks against which they can best be comprehended, and as the product of a specific human being (with a certain biographical background and a set of views that have been publicly manifested), I will help the prospective spectator make better sense of what she is watching. Contextualization is not done at the expense of a close engagement with the films; all to the contrary, it shows its pertinence in the elucidation of scenes. Meanwhile, I also try to give the reader a sense of the main interpretative lines that have emerged about the films, which at points may naturally contradict one another.

Given the importance I ascribe to Moretti's views and experiences, it may seem somewhat surprising that I did not conduct original biographical research, or interview the filmmaker myself. But my goal was not to dig any recondite new piece of biographical evidence; my purpose was to figure out

how the biographical information that is available casts light on the work, and to do so without creating a mish-mash between the figure on the screen and the flesh and blood filmmaker. Similarly, I did not feel the need to interview Moretti, for he has been offering extensive – and insightful – commentary on his films almost from when he started making them. To my mind, the single most important book available on Moretti's oeuvre is perhaps the collection of his interviews with Carlo Chatrian and Eugenio Renzi (2008). Meanwhile, I hope the reader will scrutinize such statements with a critical disposition, in an attitude of scepticism and even suspicion, ready *not* to feel immediately satisfied with the accounts the filmmaker offers. Wittingly or unwittingly, Moretti's explanations may sometimes function as a screen, orienting us all too readily towards superficial accounts, diverting us from closer inspection; and I do not discount the possibility that, on some occasions, I may have fallen into the trap myself.

Even if the film analysis I conduct results from the "contextualist" approach developed in Part One, this should not be thought of as the mechanical application of a theoretical schema. Rather than simply exemplifying the methods set out earlier, the examination of Moretti's films (in chapters 4, 5, and 6) itself purports to contribute to a deeper understanding of the theoretical issues raised earlier, casting a particular light on the relationship between the figure on the screen and the flesh and blood filmmaker. In order to understand Moretti's films, we must be able both to recognize the extent to which they stage elements that are inspired by Moretti's actual experiences, and the extent to which *these very elements* acquire a particular significance when included in the narrative framework of a fiction. It is not merely the fact that some of the characters' features do not have a direct counterpart in the filmmaker's personal traits; rather, even those features that *do match* Moretti's biographical self need to be comprehended in terms of their function in a story, and of the effects the director is trying to achieve with the artwork. The films are not an inert mirror of reality. Murray Smith (2011b) observes that fictional characters have both a "recognitional" aspect (the extent to which the character

resembles an actual person, or other characters from other fictional worlds) and a "configurational" aspect (that is, each character performs a function within the story, in the context of its interactions with other fictional persons belonging in the same narrative world).[2] Things that are done and said within the film thus carry different meanings from things and deeds that take place in real life – even when the two are, outwardly, the same. It is one thing for the actual Moretti to make a statement in an interview; it is something else for a character in a film to make the exact same statement. Thus, even when the recognitional element invites us to see the figure on the screen as Moretti's counterpart, the configurational aspect forces us to consider the extent to which the actions performed within the fiction carry a different significance, and need to be assessed according to different parameters.

This ability to keep in view both the analogy and the difference between the actual and the fictional is crucial for making sense of the consciousness-raising group in *Ecce bombo* (in chapter 4); of the protagonist's political opinions in *Palombella rossa* (in chapter 5); or the views expressed by Moretti's character in *The Caiman* (in chapter 6). My analysis pays particular attention to the kind of emotional engagement the film protagonists call for, for this seems crucial to understanding the ideas the films try to impart. By looking closely at what these characters say and do *within the storyworlds to which they belong*, I hope to give the reader a sense of the subtleties, nuances, and even paradoxes involved in lines from Moretti's films which have often, as it were, jumped out of the frame to become popular catchphrases. In his extracinematic statements, Moretti often crosses the boundary between the actual and the fictional, speaking *as if he was the character* – and yet this is something he can only do because the rules of the game are very clear, that is, because we know his films are *not* documentaries. Even in the so-called "diaristic" works, we intuitively grasp the make-believe quality of his performances.

[2] On the "configurational" and "recognitional" aspects of characters, see Chapter 3 (above), particularly the section titled "Disrupting the diegesis".

The kind of biographical research I feel is missing on Moretti is an investigation of the philosophical ideas that have influenced him throughout his career. It would be interesting to know what authors, besides Brecht, have been his sources of inspiration. In this thesis, I have now and then hinted at the possible pertinence of Nietzsche and Freud, but in the absence of clear cues – as clear as the ones we have regarding Brecht – I refrained from pressing the matter further. With regard to the German playwright, we have ample confirmation about the pertinence of the link in both the films and in the filmmaker's comments, whereas in relation to these other thinkers we are often guided by little more than hunches. I have preferred to stick to immediate connections, because my primary goal was – to recover Paisley Livingston's distinction – to understand the ideas Moretti includes in the films, rather than discuss whatever ideas his films evoke in me.[3] Still, I do believe that a reconstruction of the wider intellectual atmosphere in which Moretti breathes might open up promising paths for understanding his work. This would not need to focus exclusively – or even primarily – on his links to other films and filmmakers, for the scope of the ideas that matter for him is evidently broader.

Self-fictionalization is not the only issue Moretti's films delve in, and also not the only one I discuss in this thesis; but it is one that has been at the centre of his interest from very early on, and continues to be to this day. Over the past 25 years, Moretti has shot a number of short films in a mock-diaristic genre, with his own *persona* as their theme. Some of these compose narratives; that is the case of *The Opening Day of* Close-Up (*Il giorno della prima di* Close-up, 1996), where in under seven minutes Moretti plays a caricature of himself, as the movie theatre owner he really is, obsessing with every minor detail in the management of his Nuovo Sacher Cinema on the day of the – actual – release of Abbas Kiarostami's 1990 masterpiece. Moretti's performance would hardly mean anything to spectators who would

[3] Whose ideas do we discuss when we discuss a film: the ones we are interested in, or the author's own? This is what Paisley Livingston (2009) calls "the question of expressive agency", and it is central to his defence of "partial intentionalism". See my discussion of the varieties of intentionalism, in Chapter 2.

be unfamiliar with his image, both through his previous filmic incarnations and his extrafilmic interventions. What we are shown speaks to Moretti's actual circumstances, but none of it implies documentary reliability.

Some shorts are not similarly narrative. In *Diary of a Spectator* (*Diario di uno spettatore*, 2007), Moretti evokes anecdotes from his life as a moviegoer, in a similar spirit to famous scenes of *Dear Diary* and *Aprile*.[4] At one point, he recalls the time he watched the remake of *Heaven Can Wait* (Warren Beatty and Buck Henry, 1978) at the old Cinema Arlecchino – no longer a movie house – and says that if by the end of the screening the pair formed by Beatty and Julie Christie hadn't ended up together in the story, "that day I would have occupied the theatre". The anecdote echoes the segment of *Palombella rossa* where Michele watches the old weepie *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) on the small screen of a TV set, hoping against hope that for once David Lean's movie would have a happy ending. "Maybe tonight it ends well," the fictional protagonist tells his daughter, in a dialogue that did not make it to the final cut of *Palombella rossa*.[5]

Amongst these shorts, I am partial to the recent *Piazza Mazzini* (2017), a film that has the simplest of set-ups, depicting Moretti in a one-on-one Pilates session with his instructor, Patricia Quaranta (who also plays herself). Through the 6'49" of the film, she guides his movements, while he speaks continuously, repeating comments and observations he has made about *Ecce bombo* over the years, apparently oblivious to the fact that she is not engaging with what he says. The Young Turk of *I Am An Autarkist* and *Ecce bombo*, who has been in the public spotlight in Italy since his early 20s, is old now. Far from the athleticism of a water polo player, he moves at the slow cadence of Pilates exercises; of the atmosphere Michele declared his paradoxical love for at the end of *Palombella rossa* – the smell of locker-rooms, the adversaries' low blows, the spectators' invectives – nothing is left. Moretti speaks as if lost in his own mental world, rehearsing an old spiel, a

[4] I talk about these scenes in the section titled "A first-person political outlook", in chapter 6.

[5] See the section titled "The sentimental element", in chapter 5.

collection of anecdotes from his young days for which apparently no one cares anymore. The very title of the short refers to the square where he used to hang out with his friends back then, the atmosphere *Ecce bombo* recreated. In an interview, he has explained the significance of the place:

> When *Ecce bombo* came out, people said the film was too narrowly about Rome, in fact too narrowly about the city's northern section; in fact, it was too narrowly about the Prati neighbourhood, or rather just about Piazza Mazzini, really. The film was the way it was because that's where I lived, and where I hung out with my friends. (Di Paolo 2018)[6]

The song playing over the short's final credits is Françoise Hardy's *L'Amitié* (1967) – that is, "Friendship" – a nostalgic tune not only in its evocation of old friends, but also due to the fact that it was a big hit back in Moretti's teenage days. And yet, despite the melancholy, nostalgic hues, the visible ravages of time, the indirect evocation of approaching death, the tone is predominantly humourous, light, self-ironic, all of it delivered as usual in perfect deadpan. By transferring his extracinematic comments to a location where they sound absurd, repeating them yet again at no one's request, Moretti pokes fun, in a very economical manner, not only at his ageing figure, but also at the statements he has, in all probability, offered in earnest. The man babbling on the screen is, and is not, Moretti.

[6] "Quando uscì *Ecce bombo* — ha raccontato il regista — molti dicevano che era troppo un film su Roma, anzi troppo un film su Roma nord, anzi troppo sul quartiere Prati, anzi troppo su piazza Mazzini. Ed è successo perché quello era il luogo dove io vivevo e frequentavo amici."

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