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Il cinema del dubbio

by Marcello Garofalo

Marcello Garofalo: Let's talk a little about cinema other than comedy... about your historical dramas, about *Beatrice Cenci* for example...

Lucio Fulci: Well, let's talk about *Beatrice Cenci* then. *Beatrice Cenci*, like most idiots say, is a film that represents a "catharsis" for me. It was proposed to be by Giorgio Agliani and Buffolo, his partner, that said (imitating a Venetian accent): "Oh man, I want to do a film with serenades!". The idea that came to me and to my friend Roberto Gianviti, who wrote thrillers with me, was different; doing a film that shattered the story of Beatrice Cenci, creating something ambiguous out of it. We wrote two scripts: one for the producer with the serenades, etc. and the other one – very cruel and mean – that would then be used to make the film, with everything set in a civilization where first they torture you and then they send you to hell. I worked hard during the making, maybe one of those film where I worked my hardest. The fundamental difference between my *Beatrice Cenci* and Freda's – which is still a good film – is in the modernity. Its a film about the story of Beatrice, mine is based on doubt instead: who is Beatrice, an angel or a demon? She was beautiful, angelic, but also had something malicious inside. Its true that her father, a kind of famous serial killer of the time, made her walk around naked at home; but it is also true that she didn't mind doing it. So, there was something underneath... Later she falls in love with this Olimpio guy and decides to kill her father. We started shooting the film, I called Adrienne La Russa, who had done Slalom, and a great French actor, who later became a friend, George Wilson. I wanted to kill Adrienne, she was unbearable, exasperating and a bitch; even if the film did do pretty well. One of the main problems was that she "didn't wanna strip", so in the famous rape scene we used a stand-in. We got a young actor that had done a film with Giannetti called *Giorno per Giorno Disperatamente* – a horrible film – named Tomas Milian, and he was extremely handsome. Everyone warned me not to because they said "he'll be your end... he's a pain in the neck". Tomas was never a pain in my neck in all the films that we made together and we even became good friends. In *Beatrice Cenci* I recreated a poor, squalid Rome because at the time it was alleys, more alleys and the Vatican. I shot the film in seven weeks, all in small towns, with the help of an optimal photographer Erico Menczer. When I saw the finished product, I realized that I had made a beautiful, modern piece. A friend regularly called the critic over at the *Paese Sera* to tell him: "Well, this time poor Fulci merits three stars!" The critic – who did a certain type of criticism, I don't know why but he never liked me – wrote a piece and gave me one star. When he saw my

friend he said: “What do you mean, you think we can give Fulci three stars?!?” This shows the racism of certain environments that I’ve worked in and voted for. *Beatrice Cenci* was a denouncement of the abuses of Temporal Power, so much that the *L’Osservatore Romano* dedicated an entire page of insults to me even though I’m catholic. But, as a good catholic, I have doubts and my cinema is connected to that doubt.

Marcello Garofalo: You said that *Beatrice Cenci* is a “cursed” film...

Lucio Fulci: Yes, because a series of enormous tragedies in my life are tied to that film. My wife killed herself because they had diagnosed her with a tumor and I was left with two kids to take care of. In the meantime my mother died too and she had been giving me a hand with the children. *Beatrice Cenci* brought me a lot of bad luck and drug a happy family into tragedy. The film came out in Bristol and a friend, Galliano Juso, who had went to go see it, told me that people were shouting: “Death to the director!”. Why? Because it was a great film that the public couldn’t like. One day I was talking with Moravia, who had seen *Beatrice Cenci* and he told me something very acute: “We wanted (mistakenly) to see in a foul story, in a squalid affair of incest, the mirror of an epoch and a society. We wanted to make a little story a great story. The plot is wrong”. He was right.

with Antonella De Lillo, *Il cinema del dubbio: intervista a Lucio Fulci*,
Nocturno Dossier, n. 3, settembre 2003

La Monaca di Monza by Carmine Gallone

Let’s leave aside judgements on “opportunity” to instead talk about judgements of merit. On opportunity, we’d like to site the phrase that Cardinal Montini recently wrote to Mazzucchelli (the author of the book) that asked him for an opinion on the film about the nun of Monza: “I myself must respond negatively to your respectful question as to whether I can support the project of making a film from your book, supposing that the interest of such a film could only be focused on the immoral and wicked aspects of the events; I strongly doubt that their representation can generate a prevalent, beneficial catharsis of emotions and judgement in the spectators.”

Concerning the present work, it should however be said that, although remaining faithful to the theme of the wicked story, it tends to soften rather than accentuate the rough and scandalous tones of the events.

It will suffice, to such scope, to underline that the script, for the evident purpose of lightening the material dealt with, leaves out a few rather disturbing elements from the story, precisely speaking:

- 1) All references to both the abortion of Sister Virginia (summer 1602), and the birth of the baby girl (8 August 1604) who was then raised in the convent, are avoided;
- 2) The criminal acts that accompanied the attempt to conceal the plot are limited to the death of the lay sister, implying the lack of narrative of the crimes against Sister Benedetta and Sister Ottavia, later killed by Osio. Nothing is said the murders of the gardner and the blacksmith Cesare who had made at least 50 keys to open the small door of the convent where Sister Virginia passed through;
- 3) Don Paolo Arrigone's character is omitted who, having fallen for Sister Virginia, spurred Osio to act in order to lead the way for his lustful objectives!
- 4) The meeting between Sister Virginia and Cardinal Borromeo, where the nun claims the invalidity of her vows in that they had been taken before 16 years of age, and thus before the age allowed by the Council of Trent. Instead, there is a meeting between the Cardinal and Sister Virginia's stepbrother, who has come to intercede on her behalf. In this meeting, the Cardinal pronounces the most bitter and worthiest words of condemnation.

In fact, the sentence and the expiation are soon carried out. Osio is tried and hung (here, in the script, Osio dies during an attempt to escape his punishment); while Sister Virginia was condemned by Cardinal Borromeo to 20 years of isolation in a closed cell.

12 dicembre 1961

Cinema and the Cloister: The Chronicles of Monza by Callisto Cosulich

With Odorisio's *La Monaca di Monza* [*The Nun of Monza*], Italian cinema touches on the character immortalized, against her will, by Manzoni. This is the sequence of events:

1947. *La Monaca di Monza*. Director: Raffaele Pacini. Actors: Paola Barbara and Rossando Brazzi. This Tuscan director's source – virtually ignored by cinema history – isn't Manzoni but Giovanni Rosini who was the first to shed light on the facts hinted to in *Promessi Sposi* in a novel entitled *La Signora di Monza*, published in 1829 with great success but much opposed by critics, and which ended up being counterproductive for the author's image. The tone of the film is melodramatic – like most B-film productions of the time, dominated by titles like *Genoeffa di Brabante*, *Legge del Sangue*, *Madunella* and *Malaspina*. The intentions are enlightening, as the “pastoral” opinion of the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico (C.C.C.) testifies, underlining the “positive tendency of the work”.

1962. *La Monaca di Monza*. Director: Carmine Gallone. Actors: Giovanna Ralli and Gabriele Ferzetti. Second to last film from the director of *Scipione L'africano* who again doesn't fail in deeply impacting the public. Halfway between popular films gone-by and the open-mindedness of Italian cinema of the early seventies (starting with *Dolce Vita*, Italian cinema discovered sex and is now topping it with all 57 flavors), the C.C.C. classifies it as "watchable by fully mature moral adults" and their reservations would have been even more clear-cut if the astute director wouldn't have "openly shown the protagonist's error".

1969. *La Monaca di Monza*. Director: Eriprando Visconti. Actors: Anne Heywood and Antonio Sabato. Visconti, with the writer Giampiero Bona's collaboration truly surpasses the *Index*, making a film the C.C.C. judges as "told in a factitious and partial way," "without pity towards the characters", and "gratified by its precise and crude descriptions". Not even for adults.

The parody of the events that Totò gave to us in 1963, following Gallone's enormous success, should be remembered too: *Il Monaco di Monza*, directed by Sergio Corbucci, on the subject none other than the high authority of Ettore Maria Margadonna. The nun is interpreted by Moira Orfei, while Naples' great comic is supported by Macario, Nino Taranto, Fiorenzo Fiorentini and (Oyez! Oyez!) Adriano Celentano that appears as a friar. The critics of the time (all signed with the anonymous "vice") are merciless: "With this *Il Monaco di Monza* we can believe that our cinematography has reached the lowest of lows..."; "How does Totò always manage to make a film worse than the previous one?". The fact is that, while the three nuns of Monza despite their initial public success, have been lost in oblivion, Totò's *Monaco* is seen again and again in cinemas and on television and has become a cult movie like nearly all of Prince De Curtis' films have.

Virginia de Leyva is not the only nun to have interested the world of cinema, which has always demonstrated a particular inclination to rummage around in the dark recesses of convents and cloisters. The best film of these may be, in the Italian context, *Le Monache di Sant'Arcangelo*, made in 1973 by Domenico Paolella. Encouraged by his public and critical success, immediately afterwards he directed the less commendable *Storia di Una Monaca di Clausura*. Both films were interpreted by the then-emerging star Eleonora Giorgi, among others. Instead, the renowned *Interno in un Convento* is deluding. The first Italian film of the Polish Walerian Borowczyk ("Boro" to his friends) that was inspired by Stendhal's ominous tale contained in *Promenades dans Rome*. Shot in 1977, it was written that the director, coming to Italy, "gave us what we deserved". And even Valerio Caprara, his most enthusiastic supporter and author of a highly valued "Castoro" – a monographic volume dedicated to Boro's work – didn't come to his defense. But how would he have given Italians what they deserve? These were the years when Italian cinema was delighting in the search for Boccaccian surrogates following Pasolini's innocent *Decameron* and Ken Russell's *Diavoli*: films where the nymphomaniac nun was *de rigueur*. The emblematic title of this tradition

has remained *Metti lo Diavolo Tuo Ne Lo Mio Inferno* [*Put Your Devil In My Hell*], directed and interpreted in 1972 by illustrious Carneades like the director Bitto Albertini, and the actors Antonio Cantafora and Melinda Pillon. In this case, the only thing cult that has remained is the title.

Paese Sera, 6 dicembre 1987

Ghosts in Rome by Ettore Zocaro

Rome has become one of the most cinematographic cities in the world. Maybe only Paris can still keep up. The fact is that Rome is the center of the Italian cinematographic industry and this undoubtably favors it. But only up to a certain point. Rome is cinematographic for many reasons: architectonic, historic, artistic and popular reasons. Plus, after WWII, it became a fashionable place. That fascination that Paris used to have and so that a few months couldn't go by without a film set there. It would be interesting to make a list to see if more films are set in Paris or in Rome now. It might be enough just to look at the titles. For example, on one hand there is *The Last Time I Saw Paris* or *Paris Blues*; on the other, *Roma Città Aperta* and *Era Notte A Roma*. Maybe Rome would win. In any case, independently from the center of the cinematographic industry, a film like *Fantasmì a Roma* couldn't be set anywhere but Rome. Only this city could provide the inspiration for a story set in an old neighborhood where people from centuries gone by seem to speak to one another, over the head of our contemporaries. An intriguing inspiration and certainly an original idea. In fact, it is the impression that you can sometimes feel while walking through certain neighborhoods: like those between the Pantheon and Piazza Navona, which still conserve something remote, in stark contrast with today's noisy and uncontainable surroundings, at the same time. If we linger on certain summer nights and we stay and listen to the open-air fountains or the conversations of certain doormen or furniture craftsmen, we can kind of feel something transforming, that the very Roman air makes strangely magical in the classic scenography of palaces and obelisks, in the common voice of a people that continues uninterrupted conversations that have been going on for who knows how long.

All of this is *Fantasmì a Roma*, a fascinating film by Antonio Pietrangeli that at the onset promises much more. But the idea was marred. Pietrangeli directed the film with enough taste, with equilibrium, without ever falling into a farce. However, it was based on a scenario that, in this case, had to be full of clever ideas and amazing situations. Instead we find an almost anaemic script that, except on two or three amusing occasions (like the "ghost" that confusingly listens to the expert testimony of an art guru about a presumably famous painting), can't maintain the rhythm that the tale sometimes manages to find. However, the formal result is irreproachable, thanks to Rotunno's

magnificent color photography that gives us an almost surreal *lunar* Rome, deep in “listening” to its past. An optimal result Rotunno’s, who will have to be remembered when the prizes for photography are given out. Even the actors, above all Mastroianni and Gassman, demonstrate to have understood the feel of the film.

Too bad that everything remains superficial and that Pietrangeli didn’t go beyond a frail amusement that seems a little like an empty refinement.

da Filmcritica n. 109, maggio 1961

Le Monache di Sant’Arcangelo by Carlo Tagliabue

Once again the recurring the motifs, in pure Enlightenment style, about free will, the miserable human condition of forced vocations and their inevitable and dramatic consequences; all of these elements have been abundantly explored and – if we like – overcome, so when they pop up again more often than not it conceals, behind the advertising flag of “historical truth”, intentions that are not exactly neither scientific nor with precise and correct information. This time they are the events that took place in the convent of Sant’Arcangelo Di Bajano (events that for different reasons have stirred the interests of both Croce and Stendhal) that compose one of the darkest chapters in the history of the Reign of Naples in the 16th century and now serve as the inspiration for the making of the umpteenth production of moral content and conventional anticlericalism. By conditioned reflex one would categorize Paolo Dominici’s (a.k.a. Domenico Paoletta) film with the previous works of analogous content, to bless it with a useless gift of comparison. Even if this time the tone of the accusals and the iconoclastic charge are decidedly attenuated and very superficial, it is immediate similar to Eriprando Visconti’s *La Monaca di Monza*, Jacques Rivette’s *La Religiosa*, Ken Russell’s *I Diavoli* and Ado Kvrov’s *Il Monaco*. All films that, more or less validly, have furnished the elements for a heated polemic about certain periods in Church history and have wanted to be an accusation against prejudice and social convention, and the abuse of power for economic and class interests. As we have said, *Le Monache Di Sant’Arcangelo* is the comeback of the 1600’s, which Croce described as being a time where “the exteriority had taken the place of interiority, where the coexistence of ecclesiastic authority and political authority constituted the cornerstone of a rigid exercise of an oppressive and frustrating power in all areas of human activity”. We are in 1577 and in the convent of Sant’Arcangelo, the struggle for the succession of the position of Abbess ignites. It is a position closely tied with material interests, like the conspicuous donations to the Church for the newly elected Abbess and the equally alluring act of

giving the local squire the right to exploiting the mines of the New World in exchange for his support for the candidate. Here a series of intrigues, assassinations, jealousies, and betrayals are born that, in the end, behind the anonymous accusation of one of the nuns (tied by a particular friendship to the recently elected Abbess), brings the truth about life in the convent to light. All of which results in an inquisitorial trial. The final sentence, while on one hand confirms the donation made to the Church and considers the privilege of squeezing gold out of the American mines for the local squire as a right, and on the other sentences the Abbess to death and other nuns involved in the scandal to life imprisonment.

Given the argument in question and considering the kind of bad direction taken by more inferior Italian cinema, the fact that the director didn't dirty his hands with certain easier aspects which can be more vulgar and popular, like erotic scenes or torture scenes, giving us in such a way a relatively decent piece from a formal point of view and which in some points even reaches brief moments of lyricism. Instead, the ideological part and the part that criticizes an oppressive and inhumane system, since that criticism isn't expressed from valid and serious elements, the results are therefore necessarily laughable and lacking any profound ideal.

da Rivista del Cinematografo, marzo-aprile 1973, pp. 155-156

La Monaca di Monza (Una storia lombarda)

Severe and brusque, not exactly to the extent of the actual event's power and the widely diffused distorted education that Italian cinema has created, *La Monaca di Monza*, Eriprando's second film, confirms the stylistic and narrative qualities of its young author. Already announced many years ago by his first stimulating film *Una Storia Milanese* and to then be steadily confirmed by a series of precise and unusual television projects.

It could be asked if the most recent fortune of this character, the notorious Virginia de Leyda (a television episode with Giovanna Ralli, a smoky drama by Testori and today's film) is wholly sincere and if it really is Manzoni's celebrated reticence "the unfortunate one who rests" that has found such a diffused following. However, it should be added that if this is the topic debated, Eriprando Visconti – morally commendable nephew of a famous uncle – did it in an acceptable way. With a lightning prologue that violently illuminates the figure of the sad protagonist, Giampaolo Osio and the material and moral disorder of those years; later the dry and precise execution of the well noted tragic novel. Visconti and his screenwriter, Giampiero Bona, had a precise and fully expressed idea in the images: that turpitude, more than being the work of two exceptional creatures in their following evil, is the fruit of those dark times. It isn't Virginia that

brings corruption to Monza's convent. She finds it there already and is its victim, more for her predisposition to eros than malice.

So the film depends not so much on the events that add repetitions to the already showy nature of the system as on the psychological investigation of the nun, in her hesitations, in her final and definitive fall. Osio is first arrested because of Virginia's accusations and then freed again because of her in the setting of a monastic connivance that can be mostly ascribed to Virginia's charm and prestige. One holds the other until the final punishment. Osio, betrayed, is killed; Virginia brought in chains in front of an ecclesiastic tribunal and tortured, confessed and finally condemned to a shocking seclusion in a tiny walled-up cell. That she survived 13 years until Cardinal Borromeo's pardon isn't shown in the film but the fact, like everyone knows, is historic and indicated that the design of Providential redemption found the support of an exceptional physical resistance in its object.

It remains to be said that, circumscribed in reasonable terms even if the heroism that trickles from this story is not exactly rigorous, and limited to a few chilling moments (like the one already cited), Virginia's seduction and the massacre of the Lay Sister Caterina, the violence, the connective tissue of the film, is traced in a certain emotional dilation, maybe beyond the historical facts: this brings more of a dark love affair than a vile passions to life, giving those characters a human warmth that they might not (and almost surely not) have merited.

The costumes and scenography, in part reconstructed and in part taken from well chosen natural settings and Kunveiller's optimal photography add not few merits to the film. It also has the intense and persuasive acting of Anne Heywood, supported by Andrea Sabato as Osio, and Hardy Kruger as Don Paolo who was good but not completely comfortable in a character that expressed more deceitfulness than romantic insolence.

Il Popolo, 28 febbraio 1969