

# ARCHIVE FEVER

## The Films of Pietro Marcello

BY BLAKE WILLIAMS



As is true for many of the more interesting Italian filmmakers currently working outside of the country's "thriving," increasingly globalized film industry, Pietro Marcello's films liberally fuse a range of *vérité* and metaphysical elements to contemplate the evanescence of pre-modernized and rural culture. Introspective, class-conscious, and sensitive to (art) history, Marcello can be snugly positioned alongside contemporaries such as Michelangelo Frammartino, Simone Rapisarda Casanova, and Roberto Minervini (to name but a few), who thoughtfully carry over and update neorealist traditions for the 21st century without betraying the forms and sensibilities staked out in centuries prior.

Of this emerging class of filmmakers, Marcello has been one of the more difficult to pin down. He received formal art training in painting at l'Accademia di Belle Arti, a craft that he started teaching in a Neapolitan prison after he graduated. Marcello began making short video documentaries in 2003 which advanced his work with social outcasts (especially the homeless), but the subsequent decade of his filmmaking practice—yielding, to date, four medium-to-barely-feature-length films in addition to the handful of short documentaries—precludes blanket categorizations, and exhibits few thematic or aesthetic threads that could neatly link them all together. These are films that wander with their displaced souls, plunged into realms of archives, memories, and fading ideals, and intuitively crafted to accommodate Marcello's creative impulses

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Left: *Lost and Beautiful*

Above: *The Mouth of the Wolf*

and tangents—immersed as they are in places where individuals are intrinsically in transit (trains, port towns), and engaged as they are with beings that are fundamentally transient, prone to leaving this earth oh so suddenly.

In simpler terms, Marcello's cinema is deeply humanist and Romantic; affected as he is by late-19th-century Italian Proto-Impressionist art, it ought to be. But lest his films be construed as some hazy, amorphous fog or a clump of tumbleweed, it's worth emphasizing that his work is informed as much by certain fields of cinematic formalism as it is by a nostalgia for antiquarian aesthetic traditions. Two years after Marcello first entered the consciousness of non-Italian cinephiles with *The Mouth of the Wolf* (2009), he delivered an unassuming, 52-minute biographical documentary, *The Silence of Pelešjan* (2011), about the great Armenian montage artist Artavazd Pelešjan. This project served two purposes. At the



most practical level, the film provided a worthy introduction to an underappreciated giant of world cinema, offering a rare pocket of images, glances, musings, and theoretical quotations from the filmmaker's life and work. At the same time, the film helped situate Marcello's own methodologies and philosophies within the context of Pelešjan's, not least of which being his signature "distance montage." And so while there are a few surface similarities between the two filmmakers' work that could be easily delineated (namely, the extent to which both rely on archival footage), the genealogy Marcello traces here is centred on the structuring principles that guide their films' constructions of image and sound—constructions that Pelešjan tends to describe as anti-linear, spherical masses.

Predictably, Pelešjan himself doesn't speak in the film. ("There is no room for dialogue in Pelešjan's films, and he won't speak in this one.") Instead, clips from many of his most well-known works—the jungles in *Inhabitants* (1970), the rockets in *Our Century* (1983), the birth in *Life* (1993)—are keenly organized to form constellations with Marcello's own streams from the present: Pelešjan placing flowers at a gravesite, trains barrelling through tunnels, or a bizarre, Greenaway-esque pan over a virtual wallpaper of 19th-century paintings. And while Pelešjan's own voice may be absent, transcripts of his editing philosophies do make appearances, most notably in the film's prelude, in which an explication of distance montage scrolls up over the screen like a fairytale's "Once upon a time..." "The main essence of editing is not about connecting frames, but separating them; therefore not in joining them but in their distances...The most important thing is that the key elements interact at a distance like charged particles and create an emotional field for the entire film."

Pelešjan openly opposes the inevitable comparisons made between his montage principles and the strategies employed by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. As he says, the charge he's looking for doesn't reside in the spatial meeting of adjacent shots, i.e., in the cut; rather, the intensity of his films is created from an orbiting

system of elements. When he reluctantly spoke about his filmmaking in Scott MacDonald's third *Critical Cinema* volume, Pelešjan said that although any two of these cinematic elements may never directly meet one another in the film, they will run parallel, gazing over at one another, moving backwards and forwards simultaneously. More romantically, they look out for and love each other despite knowing they can never be together; less abstractly, his is a montage that means to engage with viewers' long-term rather than short-term memories, juxtaposing shots and sounds that may occur minutes apart. And it is in this theoretical ambition to dialectically conjoin past and future elements in the present that encapsulates Pelešjan's most vital influence on Marcello's filmmaking. The difference is that whereas for Pelešjan the elements within any given film are cut in order to forge an illusion of simultaneity (however out of time they may collectively be), Marcello's subjects, places, and elicited memories still bare the temporal distances—decades, centuries—standing between them.

This is nowhere more apparent than in Marcello's whatzit essay film, *The Mouth of the Wolf*, which, if no longer his best film, still stands as his most aesthetically and structurally complex work. The film was shot in Genoa—a city in which he'd previously spent little time, and of which the bulk of his knowledge came from stories his father told him about his days there as a sailor—and it can feel like a cloud of patinaed memories drifting in from outer space. Its images, wired up in digital halos, frosted blues, scorched oranges, and slabs of impenetrable video blacks, make visible as much as they shroud. Faraway horizons and fishermen in the foreground are flattened and smushed into single, wavering surfaces as radiant as they are pallid. Hookers pose in neon, ghost ships slip beyond silhouetted city workers, and bodies and structures paint the 4:3 frame as if in gouache.

Within this haze of impressionistic detail Marcello locates the figure of Enzo, a well-dressed, handsome, mustachioed castaway pulled into the picture in a tide, squeezing through rows of ship

crates into a city of stray dogs and cracked madonnas, tourist traps and corporate imports. Enzo, embodying the film's rusty, halcyonic sense of longing, is beckoned into Genoa over the soundtrack: the voice of a shadowy lover, reciting her dreams, desires, and love for Enzo played on a cassette player in the present, pressed onto a tape recorded who knows how many years or decades prior. Meanwhile, Enzo, now a *flâneur* in a place he once had business in, tours the city, visiting old hangouts on the way back to Mary, the trans woman we hear on the cassette tapes whom he met, protected, and fell in love with when they were both inmates in the same prison.

As is inevitable when working in the manner of impromptu methodology that Marcello favours, this was not quite the film he set out to make. It was first conceived as something more in line with his early documentaries, or even his first feature-length project *Crossing the Line* (2007), an hour-long, Italian *The Iron Ministry* (2014) that mixes encounters with migrant workers riding an express train with pensive gazes out at dusky pastorals panning across the window glass—a Night Bus rendering of early cinema's *Hale's Tours* attraction. In the developing stages of *The Mouth of the Wolf*, Marcello, in partnership with a Genoan foundation of Jesuits, drafted the project as something closer to a portrait of the city's homeless, their marginalized, and their vagabonds. A southern-facing Italian port city, Genoa has been recharacterized over the last decades by issues with immigration, integration, and crime, and the displacement felt by its residents is not, thematically speaking, too far removed from that of the migrants populating the frames in *Crossing the Line*. After immersing himself in the city's rhythms and culture for eight months, Marcello had his fortuitous encounter with Enzo, which confirmed that this was not the place described to him by his father—at least, it didn't match his memories of his father's memories—and with that *The Mouth of the Wolf* became an active patchwork of a bygone entity, exclusively sourced from archives.

What's most remarkable about this film isn't so much its Derridean quest for original moments through a mass of decontextualized material and immaterial memories, nor the expressiveness of its imagery (though both of these aspects are wonderful); it's the inclination to welcome so many objects, thoughts, stray bodies, mundane desires, and scattered shafts of light into such an indiscriminate system—everything equal and nothing superfluous. If Marcello's generosity in *The Mouth of the Wolf* is only limited by his privileging of man over all else, he took a step toward rectifying this with his latest film, the certifiably animist *Lost and Beautiful*. Like Robert Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) haunted by the phantoms of *commedia dell'arte*—or better yet, as it was originally called, *commedia all'improvviso*—and with hints of both Disney and the Sensory Ethnography Lab, *Lost and Beautiful* is a highly unusual, assertive, and ultimately moving work. And though it may be the closest Marcello has come to making a traditional European art film, it exhibits all of the impulsive tics that make his films so singular and expansive.

The film starts with a roving POV shot from the perspective of a baby buffalo, Sarchiapone, as he enters a steely barn corridor, transitions to a purgatory of immortal Pulcinella clones passing the time with card games, and finally settles in present day Caserta (Marcello's birthplace) at a majestic 18th-century palace, the Reggia di Carditello, which is watched over by a tender-eyed shepherd named Tommaso. Once again, the film that ultimately takes shape from here is not the film Marcello had set out to make. Tommaso

and the Carditello were indeed the intended subjects—the latter a symbol of Italy's lost beauty—but the project's course was radically redirected when Tommaso passed away during production, suffering a heart attack on Christmas Eve. ("He's not dead because of the Carditello palace, he's dead because he was abandoned," surmises Sarchiapone in voiceover during one of the film's more elegiac passages.) Marcello managed to salvage the material he had—which apparently would have already occupied a space between documentary and poetic portraiture—splicing it into what would become a far more theatrical, mythological narrative picture about the sad fate of the natural world. Tommaso's presence still dominates the first act, but he is largely absent after Pulcinella (literally) takes the reins; however, his few subsequent, isolated reappearances—notably in the film's wordless coda—carry all the phenomenological affect promised by Bazin's belief in cinema's power to embalm and reanimate the dead.

The film's protagonist from this point isn't Pulcinella, but Sarchiapone. Pulcinella, a sly yet incompetent creature in Neapolitan tradition, arrives here with gentility and compassion in his duty to guide Tommaso's buffalo to a new owner: the shepherd Gesuino, who lives in a relic-infested cave burrowed somewhere in the historical region of Tuscia (now more or less Viterbo). Both of them, the immortal and the livestock, traverse the bucolic Roman region on an odyssey comprising assorted side narratives, dispirited souls, and scraps of historical detritus they encounter along the way, absorbing them into the film's whimsical and sombre exquisite corpus. A vision of the burly, deceitful Gesuino reciting Gabriele D'Annunzio's lyrical poem, "The Shepherds," appears in an interlude long before the character holds any crucial role in the narrative; Sarchiapone, meanwhile, rambles about his quest to live on a distant star, recounts dreams of humans sprouting wings and flying out to celestial lands of immortality, and preaches about how "being a buffalo is an art," living as he must in a world that denies animals have souls. To Marcello's credit, he's able to keep the barminess of these proceedings in check, balancing the film's didactic "points" and fantastic flourishes into its network of ideas without lessening the sincerity of its depressive tone.

While *Lost and Beautiful* makes a point of keeping an eye on Italy's often turbulent political present—Marcello cuts to footage of recent countryside marches, protests, and clashes with the police—the film firmly situates itself as an elegy for dying ways of living and seeing. Admittedly, Marcello's fondness for quaint and outmoded processes initially reeks of regression, and he can get a tad sentimental over these bygone times and places. But obsolescence can be beautiful, even transcendent, and, per Walter Benjamin, it is only in watching the past crumble and fade that we can be reunited with the utopian desires and promises that initially greeted a technology, aesthetic, set of ideals, etc., at its birth. So there is a strange beauty there, in dwelling on the compositional match between a shot of a buffalo lounging in a field of grass and a 130-year-old Enrico Coleman painting, or in hearing a talking animal look out from a railway car—that seminal signifier of the industrial age that accompanied cinema's own birth—proclaiming his sudden desire to have been born on the moon. The film's final, soul-crushing impact speaks to a circularity that is far richer and more complex than any of these binary "old/new," "now/then" juxtapositions might suggest, and it allows those elements to somehow be present together. If not side-by-side, then at least in an orientation so that they might look out and see one another.