

CARO DIARIO: A MODERN JOURNEY OF PURIFICATION

C*aro diario*, Moretti's fragmentary cinematic text, is an attempt to depict a rather ingenious self-portrayal. The first two chapters, entitled *In vespa* and *Isole*, can be viewed as an intellectual and "piritual" journey, where the middle-aged Roman director is desperately seeking a metaphorical purification from society's vices. These first two chapters, of intense symbolic nature, are filled with images whose eclipsed and submerged meanings are often of literary origin. In contrast, the third and final chapter, *Medici*, is a rather "objective" recording of Moretti's search for a cure to his physical illness. Unlike the previous chapters, this quest for physical purification is told through the reenactment of actual events, expressed with a pattern of documentary style techniques. The shift from one cinematographic language to the next in *Caro diario* shows the dual nature of cinema at its best: the lyrical and symbolical versus the film-chronicle. To gain a better understanding of Moretti's use of these cinematographic languages I will be referring to Christian Metz's semiological discourse. In particular, his notion of denotation and connotation seems to be an interesting epistemological tool in the analysis of *Caro diario*. In fact, while the third chapter uses denotation to state the simple visual analogy between the object and its image, the first and second chapters rely almost exclusively on the use of connotation to provide images with symbolic meaning. The allegorical value of these first two chapters is often provided by the clear influence of literary works, such as the *Odyssey* and the *Divine Comedy*. I will therefore analyze the pre-filmic codification of all three chapters, which are instrumental in making *Caro diario* a rich cinematographic text, and a modern day journey of purification.

Moretti's journey: from the dark forest back to Ithaca

The peculiar journey in the first two chapters of *Caro diario* leads the viewer into uncharted territory. In fact, the outward journey through

the streets of Rome, and then throughout the *Eolie* islands in Southern Italy, is in reality an inward journey: one of the mind, the heart, and the "spirit". As Joseph Campbell insightfully wrote:

And so it happens that if anyone - in whatever society - undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lines of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures. In the vocabulary of the mystics, this is the second stage of the Way, that of the "purification of the self, when the senses [are] cleansed and humbled".

Once we have recognized the archetypal pattern that lies at the core of Moretti's metaphorical journey of redemption, we must also recognize that *Caro diario* is most of all a postmodern cinematographic text. It is in essence a highly labyrinthine visual text, whose message is often conveyed through well-crafted and disguised literary quotations. The pre-filmic visual codification in the first two chapters is often based on what Metz called *iconography*, a standard code of images symbolic in nature, similar to the coded imagery found in Medieval and Renaissance paintings (such as the image of the lily in Barberini's *Annunciation* or the goldfinch in Tiepolo's *Madonna*). These images provide not only ways of understanding, but also ways of recalling difficult concepts. In the literary tradition Dante is probably the writer who best mastered the use of *iconography*. His illustrative and powerful images are viewed as the best link to difficult doctrinal concepts, and throughout the centuries the *Divine Comedy* became itself a source of *iconographic* imagery². Indeed, the use of Dante's imagery is apparent throughout Moretti's *Caro diario*. For example, the introductory sequence with the long shot of Moretti riding his scooter through a rather densely wooded area, is a clear reference to Dante's famous introductory verses, "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ mi ritrovai per una selva oscura/ che la diritta via era smarrita". (When I had journeyed half of our life's way/ I found myself within a shadowed forest/ for the straightforward pathway had been lost. *Inferno* I, 1-3). The *iconographic* image of the *locus amoenus* is here a clear allusion to the dark forest, employed by Dante to symbolize the social decay, the apparent lack of values and the corruption of society as a whole. The

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York: MFG Books, 1949, p.101.

² In *The Last Judgment* Michelangelo himself employed the mythical figures of Charon and Minos from Dante's *Inferno*.

middle-aged director, *lo splendido quarantenne*, takes the viewer through a journey into the underworld, as depicted by the full shot of Moretti driving under a tunnel³. Like Dante, Moretti exposes the wrongs of society with the ulterior motive of purging it of its vices. Naturally, the allegorical journey as a path to achieve purification is in this context a postmodern reading. Moretti mixes different cultural modes, embracing Marxist philosophy, pop culture, classical and medieval literature all at once. Throughout this journey Moretti will fulfill the function of the intellectual as Gramsci envisioned it: as a guide of the masses that opposes common beliefs, and as one who leads the viewer to gain an awareness of society's defects. Moretti's wholesome moral integrity is indeed emphasized by the scene where he is sitting in an empty cinema watching an Italian movie. The plot of the film echoes Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill*, where former youngsters from the sixties come to terms with reality. The loss of values and the inevitable compromise of their ideals lead one of the characters on the big screen to criticize the entire generation of the sixties by saying: "We're old, bitter, and dishonest. We used to shout awful violent slogans! Look how ugly we've gotten!" To such criticism of his own generation, often portrayed in his films, Moretti replies with a close-up of his face saying: "You shouted awful, violent slogans. You've gotten ugly. I shouted the right slogans, and now I am a splendid 40-year-old". With this scene Moretti singles himself out from the crowd to highlight his state of mind, his moral foundations, and above all his role as guide. Back on his scooter Moretti takes the spectator on a journey through a landscape of symbolical figures, where concrete images gain an allegorical value within the fictional superstructure. As Eco once wrote: "The aesthetic text continuously transforms its denotations into new connotations; none of its items stops at either the first interpretant, contents are never received for their own sake but rather as the sign-vehicle for something else"⁴. In fact, through the use of connotation Moretti constantly reminds the viewer of his role as a redeemer, whose goals and desires set him apart from the general populace. Moretti, as a

³ Clear reference to the following verses:

Per me si va ne la città dolente
 per me si va ne l'eterno dolore
 per me si va tra la perduta gente.
 (Through me the way into the suffering city,
 through me the way to the eternal pain,
 through me the way that runs among the lost.) *Inferno* III, 1-3.

⁴ U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, p.274.

modern day knight, rides through the streets of Rome slaying metaphorical dragons, in the same way Perseus, aided by winged sandals, killed Medusa. The scooter (Moretti's mechanical Pegasus⁵) lightly ferries him across the river Tiber, a modern day Acheron, embarking the middle aged director on a journey of self-discovery and ultimately of redemption. The scene of his ride through the streets of *Spianceto*, a widely despised blue-collar neighborhood on the outskirts of Rome, establishes Moretti's personal refusal of common beliefs by confronting society's venomous *clichés* and its social biases. Years of denigration have taken their toll on the minds of people who stereotype *Spianceto* as the epitome of social decline. *Spianceto*, however, appears to be, contrary to the common belief, a rather well kept urban area with no sign of social decadence or decay. In contrast, at his next stop, *Casalpalocco*, an affluent suburb commonly viewed as the ideal place to live, Moretti shows the intoxication with bourgeois values in today's society. There he confronts one of the residents whose hedonistic and pleasure seeking lifestyle is representative of contemporary trends. The condemnation of *Casalpalocco* resembles the condemnation of thirteenth-century Florence by Dante. Moretti, like Dante, is appalled by society's lack of idealism and insatiable craving for material goods. His wanderings through society's vices and faults then brings him face to face with his own inner demon. The meeting with Jennifer Beals, the protagonist in the movie *Flashdance*, can be technically labeled as an *allegoria in factis*, or in other words, a way of understanding reality in its interconnected meanings. Such allegory is based on the Christian notion that all objects, people and events, besides signifying themselves in their objective reality, can also represent personifications of abstract qualities. Virgil and Beatrice are two perfect examples, since their historical selves gain, in the fictional superstructure, the allegorical status representing Reason and Theology, respectively. Similarly, Jennifer Beals represents, in *Caro diario*, the political and social swing towards shallowness and the lack of idealism of the eighties. Of course, Moretti's confession to being enamored with the film *Flashdance*, which allegedly "changed his life", is a clear acknowledgment of his own faults and frailties. But once again Moretti's difference is confirmed by the actress who, after the brief encounter, labels him as "almost dumb", thereby emphasizing his moral and artistic integrity.

It is important to stress the clever use of *connotation* throughout this chapter. If the narrated scenes were stripped of their allegorical value,

⁵ A clear reference to Calvino's essay on lightness in *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, Milan: Garzanti, 1988.

they would turn into a collection of rather meaningless episodes. Instead, what appears to be a peculiar journal of humorous and trivial events is really much more. *Caro diario* follows the allegorical "pastiche" construction reminiscent of Pasolini's *Hawks and Sparrows*, in which the physical journey of father and son, told through fragmented episodes, had an allegorical meaning. The analogy between the two films goes beyond the allegorical and fragmentary use of the cinematographic language. In fact, Moretti's journey, some thirty years later, seems to be a continuation of the journey taken by Pasolini's characters. *Caro diario* is in many ways the aftermath of humanity's search for goals in the post-ideological era described in *Hawks and Sparrows*. Moretti personally revisits some of Pasolini's themes, such as, the threat against society's values posed by popular American culture. This was clearly illustrated by the episode in which he watches *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, an American film filled with gratuitous violence. Moretti voices his disapproval with several close-ups of himself sitting in the movie theater, often covering his eyes unable to watch the intense yet meaningless violence. This scene is followed by a full shot of Moretti leaving the theater filled with disgust for today's society, which treasures movies such as *Henry*. Moretti then starts walking aimlessly on a deserted square, longing for the redemption for contemporary values; when his disgust turns to anger he decides to confront the modern *auctoritas*. Indeed, the critic whose authority encourages gratuitous violence, greed, and lust by praising movies such as *Henry* with high-sounding yet empty reviews, becomes Moretti's next target. The surreal scene of Moretti confronting the critic at his bedside with his own reviews is reminiscent of Jimmy the cricket serving the role as *Pinocchio's* pestering conscience. But this scene goes beyond the simple analogy with Collodi's fictional character, it is in reality a clever example of intertextuality: Moretti is quoting from Pasolini's *Hawks and Sparrows* once again. After all, Moretti, like Pasolini's nagging crow, is the embodiment of the Marxist intellectual whose function it is to be the conscience of humanity. The symbolic pilgrimage to the place where Pasolini was killed (a murder that ironically resembles the murder of the crow in Pasolini's film) is a tribute to the function of the intellectual whose role as guide is crucial to the well being of the community. For Moretti, Pasolini is an icon of the values that have been killed and replaced by worthless ones. The symbolical return to those values is expressed through his ride on the dead-end street that leads him back to contemplate Pasolini's memorial. The sharpness and concreteness of those images, of undeniable allegorical value, add an archetypal feel to Moretti's voyage. It is in

some ways a journey back to Ithaca. Just as Ulysses was longing to go back to Ithaca after having spent years under the control of Circe and Calypso, so too, Moretti, longs to return to the social values represented by Pasolini after years of living in what he views as a decadent society. Moretti's lyrical journey back is a nostalgic reminder of the past role of the intellectual whose guidance and conscience is strongly missed in our society.

Virgil's failure

In the second chapter, *Isole*, Moretti's ironic employment of classical and medieval images in a post-modern setting is more apparent. The journey has here a dual meaning: it is a metaphor for life, reminiscent of the Ulysses' wanderings from island to island, and it is also a medieval pilgrimage, whose quest for purification is ultimately denied. The islands are symbolic reminders of society's tendency to withdraw into detached and self-centered microcosms. Moretti travels from one island to the next as if he were visiting different planets. The islands are very different from each other, and each one is plagued with its own set of problems. *Lipari* is just as crowded and noisy as the metropolis Moretti just left behind. This is the island where his friend Gerardo, a caricature of the intellectual, has for eleven years withdrawn into a phony self-imposed exile to study Joyce's Ulysses. *Salina*, the island whose inhabitants have withdrawn to devote their existence to raise a single child, is a place where children (*figli unici*) rule over intimidated parents. This fact is highlighted by the scene in which the father of an extremely pampered teenager confesses to being afraid of his son's opinion. Likewise, the hostile environment of *Stromboli*, and the unfriendly behavior of its population, was the result of a well-founded refusal of its Mayor's leadership; whose idea of importing palm trees from Los Angeles or providing *Stromboli's* sunsets with a soundtrack on loud speakers were rather questionable. Furthermore, the decadent island of *Panarea*, and the sober *Alicudi* are the two faces of the same coin, the body and mind forever divided.

Moretti travels from one island to the next on a boat, whose image, used throughout the chapter, reminds us of the Dantesque *iconographic* representation of the poet's wit. The establishing shot of the gray waters taken from the boat's stern, followed by a medium close-up of Moretti sitting on the deck while working on the script of the film, are meaningful reminders of the *iconographic* values held by the image of the boat. Likewise, a subsequent shot of a boat passing by while Moretti is pondering, and the director's use of the boat as a place where to think

and collect his thoughts, are clear evidence of its allegorical value. Indeed, the beginning of the second chapter of *Caro diario* seems to be a cinematic re-interpretation of the first few verses of the *Purgatorio*:

Per correr migliori acque alza le vele
ormai la navicella del mio ingegno,
che lascia dietro a se un mar sì crudele;
e canterò di quel secondo regno
dove l'umano spirto si purga
e di salir al cielo diventa degno.

(To course over better waters the little bark of my wit now lifts her sails, leaving behind her so cruel a sea, and I will sing of that second kingdom where the human spirit is purged and becomes fit to ascend to Heaven) *Purgatorio* I, 1-6.

Moretti's cinematic re-interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* can be seen in the main characters as well. Just as Dante was guided through the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* by Virgil, Moretti is guided by his friend Gerardo; but unlike Virgil, Gerardo represents the uncertainties of our century. In fact, Gerardo's initial submission to the *auctoritas* of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a modern-day Aristotle, quickly vanished. Enzensberger's disapproval of television, voiced at the beginning of the chapter, is quickly dismissed by Gerardo once he is exposed to its hypnotic quality. Gerardo's enchantment with the little screen (the equivalent of the Homeric sirens) results in his obsessive video-dependency and the eventual failure of Moretti's journey of redemption on top of the vulcano, whose image is a clear reference to the *Purgatorio's* mountain. This interpretation is corroborated by the astonishing similarities with Dante's text. In fact, Moretti and Gerardo's stroll along the beach at *Stromboli* is reminiscent of Dante and Virgil's arrival at the shores of the *Anti-Purgatorio*. Also, the deep blue sky and the surrounding landscape resemble Dante's depiction of the island's expiatory mountain. Furthermore, the Mayor of Stromboli, who greets Moretti and Gerardo as they arrive, shows characteristics of generosity and benevolence displayed by Catone Uticense, the caretaker in the *Purgatorio*. All these similarities contribute to the interpretation of Moretti's climb to the top of the vulcano as an attempt to achieve a "mystical" ascension. Unfortunately, once they have reached the top of the vulcano, Gerardo's video-dependency pushes Moretti to join a group of American tourists, symbolically located down below, to find out the new developments of the popular soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*. The irony here is very subtle since the American viewers are

just as gifted as the souls described by Dante, being capable of seeing into the future. Gerardo's enchantment with soap operas and other popular forms of entertainment apparently suggests that "junk" in general is difficult if not impossible to escape, and the intellectuals themselves are often victims of these forms of cultural decadence.

After the failure of his own redemption, Moretti quickly leaves *Stromboli* on a hydrofoil, whose characteristics of speed and surface travel are symbolic of superficial thought. Indeed, on the hydrofoil Moretti decides to go to *Panarea*, an island well known for its social life. However, upon their arrival they are welcomed by a stereotypical entrepreneur who tries to lure them into *Panarea's* glamorous lifestyle. Moretti and Gerardo immediately flee back to the hydrofoil. In the next scene the hydrofoil mysteriously turns into a ferryboat, indicating Moretti's symbolic return to deepness of thought. This time, Moretti decides to go to *Alicudi*, which he describes as "the island more island of all". After only a few days there, however, Gerardo soon realizes that *Alicudi* also represents the detachment and complete isolation from a modern society and a world that, in spite of its many flaws, is also a very comfortable place in which to live. Gerardo's comical escape from *Alicudi* is a commentary on our intellectual leadership. In fact, the intellectuals in the post-Pasolini era have fled their active role as society's guides to enjoy a secluded life devoid of responsibility. However, in spite of their isolation, intellectuals haven't succeeded in escaping society's vices, instead they often condone and embrace them. After all, as Gerardo pointed out, television itself can be viewed as the modern-day equivalent of the ancient art of storytelling.

A documentary with a final lesson to learn

The third and final chapter, *Medici*, is a portrayal of real events. Moretti shifts to the use of a different sign system giving preference to the use of denotation. The introductory scene, one of few symbolic scenes in this chapter, shows Moretti in a bar leafing through the pages of a newspaper to suggest the truthfulness of the narration of the events that follow, as if they were newsworthy. However, Moretti's reconstruction of actual events, whose authenticity is confirmed by the several close-ups of medical prescriptions, is based upon the use of denotation. Its documentary value is also stressed by the introduction of the video recording of one of his chemotherapy sessions. This brief recording leads to the narration of past events through the use of a chronologically ordered flashback. Moretti uses the narration to reconstruct the painful experience he went through before he discovered

that he had cancer. The persistent itching takes him from one doctor to another in search of a cure. Instead of a cure, he finds himself facing a never-ending Odyssey. The employment of what Metz calls "chronological syntagmas", such as the alternation between night and day, is used here to emphasize the vicious circularity of his search for a cure and also to stress the realistic elements of this chapter.

Overall, *Medici* can be classified as an expressive documentary. As Marsha Kinder and Baverle Houston pointed out:

Beginning with the *Lumière's actualités*, the documentary tradition has been linked with the mimetic view of art. Conventionally, the documentary is seen as a film that uses the camera to record external reality objectively rather than express a subjective vision of experience. But, as Welles demonstrated in *Citizen Kane*, and as Godard's hero points out in *La Chinoise*, this is a naïve view. A documentary can be as expressive and subjective as any other film because it too is controlled primarily by one man's vision of human experience⁶.

Although *Medici* is a narration of real events, it is also a story told from Moretti's point of view. In fact, the filming itself requires a choice of angle, followed by soundtracks and editing. All these elements combined create a rather subjective narration of the actual events, and Moretti is well aware he is communicating a message. He tells us that he learned something from this experience: "doctors know how to speak but they don't know how to listen". This message, clearly stated at the end of the chapter, is beautifully expressed throughout the narration by the movements of the camera. The first visit to the doctor's office, a medium shot of Moretti and the doctor facing each other from opposite sides of the table, shows a clear sign of balance between doctor and patient. However, by the end of the film we have witnessed an increasing imbalance in their relationship. The medium shot of Moretti in the office of the so called "Prince", a highly esteemed physician, shows the doctor's face dominating the screen while the patient's head is barely visible. As a result of the doctor's arrogance the patient must continue to endure his pain. After a quest that lasts several months and after accumulating a huge collection of prescribed medicines, Moretti gradually loses faith in western medicine and eventually seeks a cure from two acupuncturists. The scene of Moretti sitting down between the two Chinese doctors clearly emphasizes the respect given to the patient in the Asian culture. In fact, it was the

⁶ M. Kinder, B. Houston, *The Close-Up*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1972, p. 101.

Chinese doctor that pointed out that acupuncture wasn't the proper treatment for Moretti and that he should have an x-ray taken. The doctor's suggestion led to the diagnosis of cancer and to Moretti's eventual recovery. Although, this third chapter has a documentary value and tells the viewers about real events, it is also a story with a moral value, in which doctors have failed in recognizing cancer. Moretti, as a patient, lost faith in the authority of the doctors and ultimately in the system. The social criticism of the medical structures parallels the one displayed in the previous chapters. Moretti's target is to address the social decay that is plaguing our society and its structures. Indeed, the important lesson to share with his viewers, "Doctors talk, but they don't listen", puts an emphasis on the tragic fact that the intelligentsia, at all levels, has often lost touch with reality, and ought to go back to its original role as guide. As Gramsci said in more than one occasion, an enlightened leadership of intellectuals is fundamental to society's well being.

Moretti's *j'accuse* of our modern *auctoritates* and a symbolic ritual of purification

Reading between the lines, it is clear that Moretti isn't merely exposing society's vices; he has gone well beyond that by revealing a badly broken system. From the doctors that failed miserably in recognizing his cancer, to the intellectuals, such as Gerardo, who instead of acting as guides, often find an easy escape from their responsibilities, Moretti exposed a widely spread cancer that has corrupted all sorts of authority figures, even parents haven't been spared. With the close-up of himself drinking a glass of water, the director shifts back to the use of connotation, reminding us of Dante who purged himself by drinking the water from the river Lete in the XXXI *Canto* of the *Purgatorio* (vv. 91-102). There, Dante recited "*Asperges me*", the same psalm used by Catholic priests to absolve sinners. Moretti is aware that we won't be able to achieve a complete purification, but that shouldn't prevent us, and most of all our intelligentsia, from a vital process of purgation. The advice to drink a glass of water first thing each morning can be interpreted as a symbolic ritual of depuration from all forms of cancers, either cultural or physical. After all, Moretti's journey through the streets of Rome, the *Eolie* islands, and the doctor's offices is a renewed metaphor. In fact, Moretti's *homo viator*, the medieval metaphor that viewed life as a journey towards salvation, acquires in *Caro diario* a new meaning. Man's path has always being filled with obstacles, but nowadays man is

not aided by guides. It is up to each individual to gain a self-awareness, and to embark on a journey of purification. Moretti's *j'accuse* towards society's faulty structures is in fact strongly felt advice of an intellectual, as well as an attempt at corporal purification.

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