



Filming Coming Communities: Ferzan Ozpetek's *Le Fate Ignoranti*

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The Cinema of Empire

In the past ten years very few Italian filmmakers have borne witness to the emergence of challenging new issues brought about by the epochal and at times catastrophic changes triggered by globalization, emigration, and displacement. Only a handful of directors have shown interest in investigating the spaces of contact, or the encounter of peoples in the new geographies of "Empire," as Hardt and Negri define the current space of late capitalism and multinational market expansion.¹ Some titles of this more socially-aware cinema could encompass Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994), Bertolucci's *Besieged* (1998) and *Stealing Beauty* (1996), Mazzacurati's *Vesna va veloce* (1996) and *Il toro* (1994), Torre's *Sud Side Story* (2000), Henrique Guzzman's *Princesa* (2001), Risi's *Mery per sempre* (1989), Ozpetek's *Le Fate Ignoranti* (2001), and a few others. This group of films and directors—though partly arbitrary and necessarily partial—share the common denominator of a more candid view of the current Italian social and political situation, and a general outlook towards reality that Millicent Marcus defines as a "return to the social referent and to the moral accountability of neorealism" (11). They all take as their starting point the acceptance of a social scenario made of mass immigration from the South and the East, the disintegration of old forms of popular aggregation such as trade unions and political parties, the disappearance of social safety nets in the workplace triggered by the flexibility required by the new economy, and the emergence of minority groups—such as gays, migrants, illegal workers—to the surface of Italian political debate.

These new groups share this space of exclusion with traditionally marginalized groups. The current European Union immigration policies have inspired many analysts to dub the new political entity as "fortress Europe" since it is directly responsible for creating new forms of exclusion of its more recent subjects from participation in the political and social life of their host countries. In Italy this is particularly evidenced by the lack of any legislation supporting gay and lesbian groups (traditionally bashed by the Right and conveniently forgotten by the Left), or by rampant anti-Semitism.² Moreover, one might point to the ongoing racism that has split North and South for the past fifty years, when the "Economic boom" displaced tens of thousands of cheap Southern laborers to the metropolis of the North.

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This cinema currently taking place in the space of Empire reveals a close proximity with certain moments of the history of Italian cinema. Italian cinema has in fact a long tradition of addressing important events of national history and describing the geographies of the communities in which these events take place. Therefore, contemporary authors find themselves in an asymmetrical relationship of power with the *auteurs* of the Italian cinema that preceded them. This “anxiety of influence” is visible in their attempt to remap the geographies of Italian cinema, either by renegotiating or subverting the representation of communities as seen in the history of Italy through images. On the one hand, this socially-aware cinema finds its obvious precursors in three main genres: 1) the Neorealist narrative mode of many post-war Italian directors, 2) the more enlightened examples of *commedia all’italiana* that often address and/or exploit the character of the Southern immigrant—*I soliti ignoti* (*Big deal on Madonna Street*, 1958) is a fitting example, and 3) some *cinema impegnato*—engaged cinema—of seventies Marxist authors such as Marco Bellocchio. On the other hand, what I believe is a less obvious inspiration—both at the level of content and style—has to be found in that cinema which pushes its investigation beyond the representation of certain social aspects of reality. I am thinking of that film practice developed by Rossellini in his post-Neorealist phase, and by Pasolini in his ethnographic engagement with the new spaces of the Third World.

In my analysis of Ozpetek’s cinema, that focuses in particular on his *Le fate ignoranti*, I will investigate both stylistic and narrative rhetorical strategies at work in Ozpetek’s project to map out the different notion of community as it developed in the spaces of Empire where center and periphery have lost their geographical connotations, and where First and Third Worlds now exist in one space, one nation, one metropolis. Moreover, I will analyze Ozpetek’s choice of inscribing his work within the lineage of Rossellini’s and Pasolini’s post-neorealist and post-national phases as an attempt to acknowledge and rewrite the visual map of Italian national cinema.

Spaces

Any change in the mode of production brings about a production of a new space, claims Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*. This is very clear to Mara, the Calabrese transsexual who laments “Non posso tornare a casa” in Ozpetek’s *Le fate ignoranti* (The English title is *His Secret Life*). Attending her grandmother’s one-hundredth birthday celebration would reveal her sexuality to her family: there is no going back. While De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief* (1946) is a searing investigation of the failure of state apparatuses to assist Antonio Ricci in his desperate cry for help at the door of the Police, Party, and Church, *Le fate ignoranti* offers the representation of an alternative space for the rise of different

subjectivities. It is Giorgio Agamben in his *The coming community* who identifies the affirmation of the “whatever singularity” in the post-Tiananmen era. “Whatever singularity” describes, in Agamben’s words, “a being whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging (being red, being Italian, being Communist) nor by the simple absence of conditions (a negative community, such as that recently proposed in France by Maurice Blanchot), but by belonging itself” (84). As Agamben elaborates, “the novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization” (84). The rejection of the State and the Law, in any of its incarnations, and—for that matter—of any traditional forms of aggregation and state apparatuses, is the undercurrent political situation of this film. The community at the center of *Le fate ignoranti* is in fact cemented by their sense of exclusion and desire to belong beyond any concrete social and political project.³

Ozpetek's Letter

The Turkish-born Italian director Ferzan Ozpetek has been systematically staging his stories in the new spaces of Empire: his first works, *Hamam (Steam – The Turkish Bath, 1997)* and *Harem Suare (1999)*, deal with the experience of foreignness of Italians in Turkey, *Le fate ignoranti* deals with the unplanned encounter of a middle class Italian woman with an odd community of marginal individuals—immigrants and gays—in a Roman building. His most recent work *La finestra di fronte (2003)* deals with the aftermath of the Holocaust in the Roman Jewish community. Ozpetek’s own in-between identity, both as a gay man and as a displaced person, is reflected in his works that address with humor and canniness the notion of foreignness itself, the way in which it is played out and staged by the Other, and how it is perceived by the native communities. In his first feature film, *Steam – the Turkish Bath*, Ozpetek tells the story of a sort of homecoming. Young Francesco (played by Alessandro Gassman) is a successful architect in Rome, where he shares an expensive loft with his wife, who is also his business partner. One day a letter from the Turkish embassy announces the death of Francesco’s aunt, who emigrated to Istanbul many years before. She has left him as his inheritance a Hamman, a Turkish bath in an old working class neighborhood of Istanbul.

It is often a letter that triggers the story in Ozpetek’s films. A letter sent and gone missing, a letter unread, a letter sent back or sent to the wrong address, a letter lost and eventually found by the wrong person. This traditional narrative device (Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” comes to mind) that sets the action in motion (the wrong person in the wrong place) acquires in Ozpetek the characteristic of a

double interpellation. It is a call from the State Apparatus, to use an Althusserian term, that constitutes the individual as subject. Francesco is forced into a position of subjugation, reminded of his familial and legal ties by a document from a state institution. The official document is also a letter from the past that rescues Francesco from the limbo of anonymity in which he lives. The insipid bourgeois life of Francesco is indeed “rescued” by the official letter that defines in one moment his familial ties, and his unavoidable link with Istanbul. This ambiguous relationship with power and authority in the text evokes Agamben’s notion of the spaces of the coming community as “not a struggle for the control of the State”—which could be used to describe the central issues of many Neorealist films—but as a coming together of individual subjectivities. In Istanbul Francesco will find the lover (it is, after all, a coming-out story), the family and the community that his life as a professional never allowed him to find in Rome. While his home in Rome is an isolated apartment on a rooftop, without any visible sign of communication with the urban surrounding or with Rome’s history (the view from his rooftop garden overlooks only other isolated apartments that mirror his in their seclusion), his host family in Istanbul lives in an old working-class neighborhood of the city.^{iv} Here men and women interact on a daily basis, news is transmitted through balconies facing each other, shops and businesses open onto the streets—they are as much a space of commerce as a space of community. It reminds the viewer of the lifestyle Rossellini portrays of Pina’s neighborhood in *Rome Open City*, where each individual’s life is steeped in a sense of community. Ozptek’s Istanbul mirrors the pre-economic boom images of Italian Neorealism, and points towards his most insightful and complicit witness, Rossellini’s *Rome Open City*, a movie as much about resistance in Rome, as it is about the incoming community of the new Italy born from the rubbles of World War II.

La fata ignorante

In *Le fate ignoranti* it is a painting that triggers the action: Antonia and her husband Massimo have been happily married for the better part of ten years when a sudden and tragic car accident kills Massimo. While going through her husband’s possessions, Antonia discovers that her beloved Massimo has had a secret life for the last seven years. In his office she discovers a painting lovingly signed on the back “La tua fata ignorante”. This signature will lead Antonia to the discovery of a hidden and invisible community in the heart of Rome.

The address that triggers the action in the form of the painting does not come this time from the space of authority of the Established Order, but from the Other, the marginal community of elective affinities that brought together the marginalized and the excluded. Antonia’s character is the fulcrum of the story. On the one hand the

plot is pieced together around the narrative structure of her single point of view; in so doing it allows the audience to enter and explore the odd characters of the story from the advantageous point of her shuttling experience, from outside to inside and back. On the other hand the audience is confronted with her dilemma of thinking about herself in respect to the Other, and how she fits in this space of otherness. Antonia therefore speaks to us from a plural space establishing a dialogical perspective where the terms at play are Italian/foreign, gay/straight, middle-class lifestyle/alternative lifestyles, and life/death. The process of self-renegotiation that Antonia undergoes is the same that the audience is forced to witness. Antonia's central position as both the principal character and the diegetic gaze that leads the audience through the story clearly shows that the political subtext of *Le fate ignoranti* is not the glorification of a gay or alternative lifestyle per se, but the analysis—through the eyes of Antonia—of the contact space, the chemical reaction triggered by the meeting of different lives. Antonia is in fact our private guide in the encounter with the Other.

Antonia finally discovers the real identity of her late husband's lover: his name is Massimo, he works at night in the local fresh produce market, and he owns a rooftop apartment in the Ostiense neighborhood in a working class area of Rome which he keeps open to a large group of friends. *Le fate ignoranti* establishes from the very beginning a dialectical approach to living spaces. The enclosed space of Antonia's villa in the suburbs, where she shared a life (a lie) with her devoted husband, is contrasted with the openness of the community sharing space and visions on the rooftop terrace of their building. It is here that Antonia discovers the double life of her late husband.

Ozpetek's attempt to create a dialogue with certain authors and trends in Italian cinema goes beyond the choice of stories, characters, and locations. While many have criticized Ozpetek's camera style for his conservative choices, I believe there are very significant stylistically excessive moments in *Le fate ignoranti* that rescue the director from the banality of the current television-influenced directing style. A decisive stylistic choice occurs when Antonia is attending a dinner on the terrace. Almost at the end of the film, after a series of traumatic meetings with Michele, Antonia has become somewhat familiar with the flamboyant *brigata*. One night Michele invites her for a dinner on the terrace. In this scene the "shuttle" role played by Antonia visually bridges the inside/outside dichotomy to occupy a space that overlaps between binary opposites: it is also a way for Ozpetek to intersect his gaze with Antonia's. The meal is over and Antonia is taking care of the dishes, "shuttling" from the kitchen to the terrace (visually concretizing her status of insider/outsider in the community). Upon her return to the terrace the camera frames Antonia's face in a close-up shot. It is here that a long sequence shot begins. The camera slowly pans left to align

its gaze to Antonia's, moving from a close-up to a concrete point-of-view shot. She looks out to the group of friends gathered around the table: it is in this moment that the camera detaches from Antonia's gaze and pans 180 degrees around the group focusing on close-ups of each of the members of the group. Ozpetek breaks the shot/reverse-shot convention he has been following almost exclusively up to this point in order to present two enunciative voices overlapping. The director's gaze-effaced up to this moment-takes over as an enunciative voice in order to inscribe his presence in the diegesis in a form of "free indirect style", theorized by Pasolini.⁵ Antonia—at the same time central to the story and moving in-between spaces as a character—through whose gaze we have been experiencing the new community, is now positioned as a stand-in for the director himself. It goes without saying that knowledge of Ozpetek's homosexuality and foreignness helps us overlap the two voices.

Quite like Ozpetek's Antonia, Rossellini's Katherine (played by Ingrid Bergman) in *Voyage in Italy* (1953) has her gaze "stolen" during her visit to the Archeological Museum in Naples. Roberto Rossellini, in his films with Ingrid Bergman, such as *Stromboli* (1950), *Europa '51* (1952), *Voyage in Italy*, and *La paura* (*Fear*, 1954), began his lifelong analysis of the effects of alienation and displacement on new historic subjects, aiming to capture the phenomenology of this rapidly changing society. In this group of films reality (and realism) is not abandoned, but analyzed through what André Bazin explains as Rossellini's "filtering" of reality itself (99).⁶ It is during one of her trips around the city that Katherine walks into the museum: the point of view shots of the statues suddenly stop. The camera detaches from her concrete point of view to roam around the ample rooms, fixing its gaze on the Roman statues and artifacts of the museum. Rossellini's disembodied point of view shots visually enact Katherine's experience of the past and, ultimately, death. Rossellini's phenomenology of displacement of his post-neorealist phase is more than a simple quote in Ozpetek's film. The dialogue between *Le fate ignoranti* and Rossellini's masterpiece is concretely asserted for the audience at the very beginning of the film when Antonia and her husband meet in fact at the *Centrale Montemartini*, an electric plant converted to a museum in the heart of the Ostiense neighborhood, where a show of Roman art from the Capitoline Museums is on display. In this typical space of post-modernity, the ruins of the abandoned plant re-appropriated by the city as space of community, Massimo and Antonia are pretending not to know each other in a game of courtship and performance that hints at the bigger performance of heterosexuality and monogamy that the husband has been playing with his double life. As if they were trying to avoid the gaze of the camera, the couple exits the frame before the takes end, leaving the camera and the gaze of the spectator lingering

on the Roman artifacts while the two characters move about the rooms. The ruins of the past stand metonymically in the diegesis as signifiers of their already waning relationship: it is a display, a performance, a show of something that is no longer alive. In *Voyage in Italy*, Katherine and Alex have been sharing a similar life of surfaces: their trip to Southern Italy, and the impact that the encounters with the ruins of dead civilizations have on them—Pompeii, in particular—forces them to renegotiate their relationship.

From an historical perspective, these formal and narrative modes—the use of “free indirect style” and the detachment of the camera from the flow of point of view narrative, and the political gesture of the director to inscribe himself self-reflexively in the narrative—intend to offer the audience the same experience of reality as “filtered” through the gaze of the outsider. Katherine and Antonia are indeed filtering bodies, whose gaze directs the audience through a phenomenological process of discovery.

Pasolini's Alterity

Pasolini looms large over Ozpetek's oeuvre: not only because he was openly homosexual as Ozpetek is, but also because of his interest in describing spaces of alterity. Pasolini's desire to transcend national and stylistic barriers, led him to flee from the Roman *borgate* into the Third World. The alternative offered at first by the sub proletarian is replaced by the radical difference—the alterity—of the vast landscapes of Africa and Asia. This change sets off a film practice where, making use of an experimental and ethnographic mode, he depicts and poetically filters the uncanny spaces of post-coloniality.⁷ Both Ozpetek and Pasolini share a common interest for the excluded, those left behind by new economic and political processes. Both inscribe their personal biographies in their works, making of self-reflexive strategies their *modus operandi* and *poetandi*. While, generally speaking, stylistically the two auteurs differ in their approach to filmmaking, some common elements are quite visible. The use of free indirect style, as discussed before, and the practice of pastiche—the juxtaposition and contamination of styles, genres, and methodologies—are some of the most visible features of Pasolini's cinema, and indeed pastiche reemerges in one of Ozpetek's most traumatic scenes in *Le fate ignoranti*. It is a dance party held on a barge on the river Tiber, where—in a very similar location—the powerful beginning of *Accattone* (1961) takes place, and Accattone, standing between Bernini's angels, dives from Ponte Santangelo. The sequence in *Le fate ignoranti* presents us with the first moment of open sexuality in the gay community. Michele starts kissing somebody and Antonia is stunned by this concrete display of sexuality; for the first time she is physically confronted with her husband's double life. At this point the diegetic sound fades to leave room for an exotic tune, a

dreamy song in Turkish. The crudeness of the kiss, as it is understood by Antonia, is not made smoother by this choice of detachment. On the contrary, in a Brechtian mode similar to Pasolini's choice of employing Bach's *The Passion of St. Matthew* as the soundtrack to Accattoné's fight, it gives the scene an aura of sacrality and alienation, forcing the audience to abandon the flow of the diegesis in order to focus on Antonia's reaction. While Pasolini's pastiche aims to bear witness to the "martyrdom" of the Roman sub proletariat in the age of forced modernization, Ozpetek makes clear for the audience who the new Others in Italian society are.⁸

In the City

Just when Michele and Antonia seem to have become closer, even exchanging amorous embraces one night on her couch, Antonia discovers that she is pregnant. The child is Massimo's. At this point the narrative threatens to return to a possible heterosexual status quo; Michele and Antonia might share another form of lie. But this threat is avoided by one last final twist. We last see Antonia at the airport, taking off for a new life. While the closing credits appear on the screen, a last sequence in the form of an epilogue portrays all the characters of the film at the Rome World Gay Pride 2000. One of the characters holds a sign "A chi la do stasera" (Who do I give it to, tonight?). We can try to address this question, and at the same time address some issues raised by critics commenting on the film from a queer perspective. Is *Le fate ignoranti* promoting and supporting alternative lifestyles in a socially conservative and still profoundly Catholic country as Italy is in the year 2000, or is the movie simply reinforcing the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy reducing Michele's community to a colorful bunch who surfs the net in search of a shag? Certainly Antonia's point of view and her final maternity seemed to many a concession to a bourgeois audience; the character filters the emotions of the film, and at the same time provides a "yardstick" of comparison between gay and straight. But as I have argued earlier, the choice of Antonia as our guide through the community is, quite on the contrary, the strength of the screenplay. It is not important where she goes, rather what is important is her movement as search for her own place. The open-endedness of the film's finale shares the desire not to foreclose Antonia's possibilities and to bring the contact to a shift. Antonia's final move is mirrored by *Le fate ignoranti's* ambitious finale with a public moment, in the streets of Rome. The marginal community of the excluded moves from the *Exopolis* (the city on the margin) to the *Polis*, the center of the city.

The new space that Antonia and the viewer experience in *Le fate ignoranti* continues the Rossellinian and Pasolinean tradition of post-neorealist phenomenology where issues of gender, social, political, and

migrant identities clash and battle on an operatic new stage. The outrageous characters of the story of *Le fate ignoranti*—not necessarily defined by sexual orientation, from the Turkish political refugee to the *Calabrese* transsexual—force the protagonist, Antonia, out of her bourgeois shell and into a renegotiation of the mourning for the death of her husband. Avoiding a comedic return to normality, Antonia's processing of her husband's death has turned into a renegotiation of her role as "wife" first, as "woman" next, and eventually as "mother". It is not surprising that Ozpetek's newest work, *La finestra di fronte*, taps into the most untold catastrophic event of the history of the city of Rome: the Holocaust, that which is a searing lack in *Rome Open City's* mythopoetic enterprise of creating a new history of Italy through images.

Ozpetek's cinema brings together, literarily, that which has often been apart in Italian cinema. It is an investigation of new spaces and peoples as products of globalizing movements, and an attempt at placing them against the tradition of Italian cinema. The frequent quotations in his cinema, rather than displaying a simple erudition, forces audiences and scholar alike to confront and challenge their filmic memory, and in so doing transform the canonical History of Italy through images. The lack, that which is missing, is rescued and re-projected on the national silver screen by Ozpetek's patient filming of new and old communities. To whom, then? The sign in the form of a question mirrors the quest of a political and filmic investigation in *Le fate ignoranti* of untold—past and present—"coming communities."

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NOTES

¹ I borrow and adapt the notion of contact from Mary Louise Pratt's definition of "contact zones," as elaborated in *Imperial Eyes*. She defines contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination - like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today. The space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (4). While I am not claiming a direct relationship between the current Italian socio-economic situation and the seventeenth and eighteenth century colonial and postcolonial phases in Africa and South America addressed by Pratt in her work, I believe it is hard not to bring to comparison the current political issues developing in the periphery of the Western world, and the "asymmetrical relations" Pratt highlights in her study.

² A recent survey by the newspaper *La Repubblica* showed that 35 percent of adult Italians believe that Jews are part of a world conspiracy to dominate the world economy.

³ Contrary to certain hippies' experiments in communal life of the '60s and '70s, the community of *Le fate ignoranti* does not offer itself as a concrete alternative lifestyle project. The individuals portrayed by Ozpetek seem to share a desire to belong that is triggered by their exclusion rather than by a clear political commitment to create an anti-establishment social nucleus. I would like to thank Aine O'Healy for bringing this issue to my attention.

⁴ On the notion of postmodern "fortress architecture" see Mike Davis, 22.

⁵ It is Pasolini in his "The Cinema of Poetry" who theorizes the free indirect discourse as a mode in which the director rhetorically assumes the subject position of the character within the diegesis.

⁶ Quite interestingly, Rossellini's post-neorealist phenomenology of a rapidly changing society is what is left out of the otherwise thorough and innovative study by Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles*, where the author insightfully analyzes the geographical and political spaces of the new subjects brought about by the complex outcomes of the "miracles" witnessed according to Restivo by - mostly - Antonioni and Pasolini.

⁷ On the issue of Pasolini's ethnographic approach to the representation of the Third World, see Caminati.

⁸ Hal Foster in his *The Return of Real* (173) articulates well this paramount shift in the understanding of Otherness in Western societies, where economic relations have been replaced by cultural identities, gender and race.