

**LO SPECCHIO FRAMMENTATO ED
IL PAGLIACCIO PIANGENTE:
ALIENATION AND L'UMORISMO
IN THE FILMS OF NANNI MORETTI**

Mathias Stevenson

Sommario

Quest'articolo esamina il modo in cui il cinema di Nanni Moretti usa uno sguardo autoriflessivamente critico per parlare della condizione frammentata ed alienata di un soggetto maschile, italiano e di sinistra, nella tarda età capitalista. L'articolo mette a fuoco come l'uso morettiano dell'umorismo, con palesi tratti pirandelliani, effettui un sovversivo sdoppiamento artistico, poetico e filosofico. Si dimostrerà come Moretti usi l'umorismo per studiare in profondità lo straniamento sociale e la frammentazione esistenziale dei suoi personaggi. Lo svelarsi dei dolori, dei desideri e dei gusti del proprio autore fornisce al cinema di Moretti una prospettiva personale, tragicomica e politicizzata, che mantiene una pertinenza di larga portata.

Nanni Moretti's first feature length film, *Io sono un autarchico* (*I Am Self-sufficient*), released in 1976, marked the arrival of a young self-reflexive, independent and highly original figure into Italy's troubled cinematic landscape. Self-financed, using Super-8 and involving the acting of himself and that of his close friends and his father, this film set the trend for Moretti's cinema. This idiosyncratic cinematic approach would forever be defined by an intensely personal inquiry imbued with Moretti's own obsessions, neuroses, desires and humour. His work comprises a

further eight feature length films and six major awards: *Ecce bombo* (1978); *Sogni d'oro* (*Sweet Dreams*, 1981), winner of the Golden Lion Special Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival; *Bianca* (1984); *La messa è finita* (*Mass is Over*, 1985), winner of the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival; *Palombella rossa* (*Red Lob*, 1989); *Caro diario* (*Dear Diary*, 1993), winner of the Silver Ribbon at Rome, a Golden Globe for best Italian Film and Best Director at the 47th Cannes Film Festival; *Aprile* (1998); and *La stanza del figlio* (*The Son's Room*, 2001), winner of the Golden Palm for Best Film at the 50th Cannes Film Festival. Together with Angelo Barbagallo, Moretti also founded the film production company *Sacher Film*, the choice of name in homage to his preferred Viennese cake. *Sacher Film* has produced the films of aspiring young directors such as Carlo Mazzacurati and Daniele Luchetti.

Although he has been classified as “one of the most outstanding figures in contemporary European and world cinema” and as “the most important Italian film-maker of the past thirty years” (Mazierska and Rascaroli, 2004:1), until his most recent success at the 50th Cannes Film Festival, Moretti was little known outside of Europe. While the critics and public have always been more receptive to his unusual and original style in France, where he won the Best Director award for *Caro diario* and the Best Film award for *La stanza del figlio* at Cannes, in his homeland his films have been less widely appreciated.

Claudio Carabba has referred to Moretti as “Il regista più amato (e più odiato) d'Italia”, declaring that “c'è chi lo ama e si identifica nei suoi personaggi e chi lo detesta” (Carabba 2001:28). Generally, when his work has been criticised it has been by those who believe his profoundly

personal and self-reflexive approach is too narcissistic and self-referential to be widely relevant.¹ Also, there has been a sharp divergence in opinion regarding his status as a director. This polarisation of opinion is clear in two contrasting views put forth by Flavio De Bernardinis and Marcello Walter Bruno in the Italian film journal *Segnocinema*. De Bernardinis labels Moretti a ‘classic’ cinematic ‘auteur’ alongside such other widely acclaimed filmmakers as Martin Scorsese, Ingmar Bergman, Wim Wenders and Stanley Kubrick (De Bernardinis, 1992:21). Bruno, by contrast, writes that Moretti’s films are so ‘amateurish’ that he should not even be accorded the status of director (Bruno, 1990:5-6). Furthermore, despite the identification of Moretti and his cinema with the left, his cinematic approach has often been criticised by elements within it.²

Although Moretti has been classified by other young directors, such as Pappi Corsicato, Giulio Base, Francesco Martinuzzi, Vito Zagarrio and Silvio Soldini, as the ‘father’ of their generation of Italian filmmakers (Gieri, 1995:232), relatively little in depth academic material has been

¹ In April 1998 the weekly publication *Liberal* put his face on its cover with the mocking title and subtitle “L’onorevole Moretti. La beatificazione di un regista e i tormenti della Sinistra”. In the editorial of that edition, “Il Pascoli della Sinistra,” Ernesto Galli della Loggia makes clear his distaste for Moretti’s self-reflexive artistic approach with particular reference to the film *Aprile*: “Sostenuto dal suo narcisismo - così grande che non gli permette di raccontare nulla ma solo di esibire [...] il proprio ego - [Moretti] non si perita di dispiegare davanti all’Italia dell’Ulivo, che ne va in visibilio, il bagnetto di suo figlio appena nato, i piccoli scatti umorali, le sue manie collezionistiche, le sue paure e le sue nevrosi, come se racchiudessero chissà quale significato” (Galli della Loggia, 1998:14-15).

² About *Ecce bombo* Goffredo Fofi writes “questi ex-militanti che non sono tali (mai definiti rispetto a che militanza hanno fatto: la ‘crisi della militanza’ è data per assioma astratto), che non fumano, non si bucano, non viaggiano, non vanno all’università né alle manifestazioni, non si suicidano e non sparano, non leggono, non discutono, non sperimentano, e che sanno solo per sentito dire, come il regista, che cos’è l’autocoscienza, esistono certo, ma erano e sono altrettanto certamente ‘marginali,’ i sotto-culturali del movimento” (Fofi, 1978:153).

devoted to him, particularly in English.³ In this article, I will argue that Moretti's films, far from being regressive and narrow in scope, use critical self-reflexivity as a powerful means to reflect and comment on the condition of an alienated and internally conflicted leftist male subject, in late capitalist Italian society. More specifically, I will examine how his cinema is filtered by a Pirandellian sensibility that is witness to a subversive, humoristic doubling of the self which serves to explore the social extraneousness and existential unease of its characters.

One of the most striking features of Nanni Moretti's cinematic approach is the way in which it facilitates an intense critique of a contemporary male subject's disharmonious state of being. This inherent feature of his work is inseparable from the use of self-irony as a critical narrative device, which helps articulate a discordant and fraught relationship between a particular subject and his external context. This problematic relationship between subject and world is characterised by a collapse of the dialectic and the impossibility of achieving a desired level of emotional, social and ideological integration. For Roberto De Gaetano, this conflict is the effect of "un irrigidimento dissonante, senza alcun autocompiacimento da parte di un soggetto animato dalla pretesa di rivelare le assurdità del mondo e di piegarle ai propri ideali e alla propria visione (morale) della realtà" (De Gaetano, 2002:23). Moretti himself has stated that his concept of autobiography, far from being a process of "autocompiacimento", is one of "crudeltà e presa in giro" (Ugo and Floris, 1990:45). In response to the criticism that his work is too self-centred and self-contained, Moretti has declared that only by departing from himself is he able to reach others (cited in Ranucci and Ughi, 2001:45).

³ Mazierska and Rascaroli's recent book, cited above, is the first book-length study in English. For another, earlier, important English language study see Bonsaver, 2001-2.

Moretti's notion of harsh cinematic self-interrogation is an effect of his use of *l'umorismo* (humour) and is reflected in the existential incongruity of his self-referential screen characters: Michele Apicella⁴ (*Io sono un autarchico*, *Ecce bombo*, *Sogni d'oro*, and *Palombella rossa*), Don Giulio (*La messa è finita*), Giovanni (*La stanza del figlio*) and Nanni (*Caro diario* and *Aprile*). Despite the constant attempts on behalf of these characters to overcome the atomising tendencies of their social worlds, they are continuously impeded and corrupted by their own, insuperable narcissistic obsessions. These narcissistic obsessions stem from an unwillingness to accept an imperfect social, cultural and political world. Cinematically, this ironic character-centred narcissism, which merges the enunciating and the enunciated subjects, in turn focuses the narrative gaze of Moretti's films on the problems created by a widespread cultural narcissism. Thus, the complicity between the narrating and the narrated subject establishes an idiosyncratic and personal method of social, cultural and political criticism. As Giorgio Cremonini has pointed out, "sia la comicità che il narcisismo di Moretti sono innanzitutto strutturali: si riflettono nel cercare in se stesso uno specchio del mondo, nel parlare di sé per parlare d'altro" (Cremonini, 1999:46).

In his essay "L'umorismo", the Italian novelist, playwright and philosopher Luigi Pirandello describes 'l'umorismo' as a philosophical category involving a form of cognition, 'il sentimento del contrario', which follows the observation of a 'rappresentazione umoristica'. This 'sentimento del contrario' inspires a feeling of perplexity and internal division and, consequently, the spectator's laughter is disturbed by

⁴ The highly self-referential character of Moretti's films is underlined by the fact that Apicella is his mother's maiden name.

something that emanates from the representation itself (Pirandello, 1986:139-140). The internal splitting which 'l'umorismo' inspires is regarded by Pirandello as an intrinsic human capacity, and finds voice in the many internally divided characters in his artistic landscape. Importantly, this sense of fracture is also central to Moretti's cinema, within which the author manages both to critique his social environment through humour and, through the doubling of his person in the 'mirror' of the cinematic screen, to critique himself employing self-irony. This notion of the divided or torn self also surfaces in the heterogeneous behaviour of Moretti's screen constructions (particularly of Michele Apicella), which oscillates between altruism and egoism and between regressive fragility and aggressive prepotency.

Interestingly, Giorgio Cremonini has noted the inherent link between this split sense of being and the 'forma comica del pensiero' found in Moretti's films. Cremonini asserts that "il comico è sempre l'uomo e lo sguardo dell'uomo: l'uomo e il suo doppio, deformato come deve essere ogni doppio che si rispetti" (Cremonini, 1999:43). There are distinct parallels between Cremonini's notion of the 'forma comica del pensiero', which he describes as a way of thinking the world and life, and Pirandello's 'sentimento del contrario', which embodies a particular philosophy regarding the incongruities of existence.

The internal tensions of the Morettian human subject reflect on the pressures inherent in the formative social and political contexts of the 1960s and 1970s. These decades were defined by a prolonged period of dynamic social and political ferment and an ever-increasing commercialisation of society and culture. Such social and cultural degeneration, resulting from the moral triumph of individualism and consumerism and the omnipresence of mass-culture, undermines the very

desire for social utopia implicit in Moretti's films. Paul Ginsborg explains that the dynamic of Italy's *miracolo economico* of the late 1950s and early 1960s, fundamentally "worked to increase the atomization of Italian civil society" and to create strong social and economic contradictions and inequalities (Ginsborg, 1990:248). The collective revolutionary student and worker political action of the period 1968-73, which rebelled against the alienating effects of authority, individualism, consumerism and Western imperialism, expressed the broad nature of the social discontent. The revolutionary student action, in which Moretti took part, opposed the secondary and tertiary education systems which "operated a class based selection [that was] heavily stacked against poorer students ever getting a degree" (300). Furthermore, the institution of the family was accused of contributing to estrangement and to the atomising tendencies of wider society (305). Ultimately, this dynamic era of collective social ferment eventuated in failure (340).

The collective sense of existential unease and ideological disenchantment that resulted from these political failures is a driving force behind Moretti's cinema and its use of humour. In this context, the use of humour facilitates a poignant reflection on the deep sense of discontent felt by Moretti and his contemporaries in the face of the prevailing cultural hegemony of consumerism and individualism. The impossibility of finding a language consistent with an integrated social identity is concomitant with a sense of powerlessness felt by the characters. An example of this communicative impotence and the inability of finding new political metaphors can be seen in Moretti's first feature length film, *Io sono un autarchico* (1976). Michele Apicella and his friends are involved in a pitifully laughable attempt at avant-garde student theatre, which fails so miserably at articulating something comprehensible that not one spectator remains for the director's post-performance debate. Such an

example of failed resistance and expression is mirrored in the disjointed and bumbling leftist male-consciousness group of Michele and his friends in *Ecce bombo* (1978), whose lack of direction is metaphorically alluded to during their trip to the beach to see the sunrise, the symbol of the once 'inevitable' socialist revolution. Ultimately, their pilgrimage ends in disillusionment and bewilderment, as the sun rises behind their backs.

By the time he makes *Caro diario* (1994), there is a conscious sense of resignation to this political alienation. Moretti's character Nanni, acted in the first person, declares that he will be "sempre più a [suo] agio e d'accordo con una minoranza" and happy "solo in mare, nel tragitto fra un'isola e l'altra." Despite proclaiming himself to be "uno splendido quarantenne" who clings to his political identity and his values against the contemporary tide, he spectrally traverses his material environment without an objective purpose while making "superficial, transitory, impersonal, segmental, and anonymous" contacts as is typical of the alienated citizen (Watson, 1976:136). After lamenting his inability to dance in *Caro diario*'s opening chapter, *In Vespa*, Nanni bumps into Jennifer Beals of the 1980s American film, *Flashdance*. His subsequent disconnected monologue associates his inability to dance with a more widespread sense of ideological and political disenfranchisement. He comically explains that if he had lived in the Emilia-Romagna region, or the so-called 'cintura rossa,' where the left's regional administrations guaranteed a greater degree of social support, he would have necessarily learnt to dance well, or, in other words, live in harmony with his surrounding world.

The rise of mass production and consumption has accompanied a neurotic and self-centered interiorisation of the individual, a sense of displacement, and an upheaval of traditional social roles. In spite of the economic and

social advances made in the post-war 'Golden Age', capitalism's past problems: poverty, mass unemployment, squalor and instability reappeared after 1973. Along with increasing socio-economic inequalities, the structural upheavals resulting from globalisation or 'transnationalisation' and its logic of mechanisation and 'free markets' have compounded these trends (Hobsbawm, 1994:411-15). Fredric Jameson, in his seminal essay "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," explains that a certain "depthlessness" and obsession with the image or simulacrum has also been a constitutive feature of the "post-modern" or "late/multinational capitalist age," the "purest" stage of capitalism to date (Jameson, 1991:6). According to Julia Kristeva the "reign of Technology" in this late capitalist era, "gives rise to 'virtual' effects and necessarily becomes the reign of appearance, pretense, and spectacle" (Kristeva, 2000:121). An increasing emphasis on the self has accompanied these above-mentioned social, economic and technological developments. Moreover, the feeling that our "lives have been flattened and narrowed, and that this is connected to an abnormal and regrettable self-absorption has returned in forms specific to contemporary culture" (Taylor, 1991:3-4).

In one of the most self-ironic and humorous scenes of *Ecce bombo*, there is an allusion to the narcissistic 'flattening-out' of social life. Michele is framed in isolation while talking on the phone to a friend. Thus, by denying the presence of the other speaker, the dialogue is visually reconstructed as a neurotic monologue. When asked to come to a party Michele exhibits his self-absorption in relation to his social environment:

Senti, ma che tipo di festa è? Non è che alle dieci state tutti a ballare i girotondi e io sto buttato in un angolo? No? Ah, no,

se si balla non vengo. No, allora non vengo. Che dici, vengo?
Mi si nota di più se vengo e me ne sto in disparte o se non
vengo per niente? Vengo. Vengo e mi metto così, vicino a
una finestra di profilo... in controluce... voi mi fate:
“Michele, vieni di là con noi, dai! E io ‘Sì, andate, andate, vi
raggiungo dopo’. Vengo. Ci vediamo là. No! Non mi va. Non
vengo. No. Sì. Ciao. Arrivederci. Buonasera.

Through its use of self-irony, this scene articulates how the ‘society of the spectacle’ reduces human emotions to expressions of neurotic artifice.⁵ Michele masks his authentic fears of social ineptitude and incommunicability by focusing on superficial aesthetic concerns regarding his image. There is a certain ambivalence to his words which interweaves a fear of isolation and low self-esteem with self-centredness. His seesawing monologue intends to provoke his friends to beg him to come, but the real duplicity of his language surfaces in one particular phrase. When Michele says: “Vengo e mi metto così, vicino a una finestra di profilo... in controluce”, there is an inherent double meaning. This phrase uses photographic language, thus displaying an obsession with the simulacra, while also referring to a process of diminutive social withdrawal and isolation. While *in controluce* means with back lighting, *con controluce* means in poor light or darkness. Michele’s self-contradictory monologue is an integral aspect of Cremonini’s notion of

⁵ Christopher Lasch stresses that the tendencies of the ‘society of the spectacle’ encourage a narcissistic response. He writes, “we live in a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion. Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving to much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors” (Lasch, 1979:47).

the “forma comica del pensiero”, during which “[...] i confini fra dialogo e monologo si dissolvono: a ogni domanda si accompagna la risposta; ci si dà torto, ci si contraddice, ci si oppone; si perpetua il *non sense* del dibattito, lo si dichiara incompatibile, incongruo — una sorta di continuo dialogo con un *sé* che è sempre meno distinguibile dall’*altro*” (Cremonini, 1999:45-6).

A certain ‘hollowing-out’ of experience has also resulted from the substitution of spiritual religion with the ‘new religion’ of capitalism. Although undoubtedly advances have been made regarding the freedom and rights of the individual, this has been accompanied by a feeling of loss and decline. We presently live in a state of relative social liberty, yet modern notions of freedom broke with preceding moral economies that emphasised a collective cosmic order. It is possible to understand the ‘sacred’ individual independence of our times as a form of civil slavery which, as Karl Marx maintains, has resulted in “the universal struggle of [...] individual against individual” (Marx and Engels, 1956:156-7). This collapse of the collective in contemporary capitalist society manufactures widespread alienation.

Erich Fromm defines alienation as a mode of experience in which the person experiences themselves as an alien. Because the individual fails to experience themselves as the creative centre of their world, their acts and their consequences have become their masters. Moreover, as much as they are out of touch with themselves, they are also out of touch with any other person (Fromm, 1991:117). Morton Kaplan maintains that alienation “occurs when an individual perceives an absence of meaningful relationships between his [her] status, his [her] identifications, his [her] social relationships his [her] style of life, and his [her] work” (Kaplan, 1976:118). Marx’s use of the term in the nineteenth century more

specifically related to the economic causes of this social condition within the capitalist system, defining it as the moment when an individual's act becomes "an alien power, standing over and against him [her], instead of being ruled by him [her]" (cited in Fromm, 1991:118). In this context, the worker becomes alienated from his/her product which is, in turn, commodified.

Ever since independently realising his first film, *Io sono un autarchico*, outside the industry, Moretti has sought to be an author creating personal and uncontaminated spaces in which to communicate. This artistic process can be seen as a means of counteracting alienation. A major step in this quest was the founding of his own production company, *Sacher Film*, in 1986 which, while allowing him to reinvest himself creatively and financially in his own films, has also enabled Moretti to pave independent and deinstitutionalised paths for new Italian directors. This fact has complimented Moretti's quest for artistic integrity which is evident in his maintaining of creative centrality as screenwriter, director and actor of his own films.

Theoretically, the Western democratic ideal of the free autonomous subject would lend us to believe that it is possible to overcome alienation. However, Louis Althusser contends that the social subject is but one of ideology insofar as the omnipresent and inescapable cultural formations, or "state apparatuses," of the dominant class covertly interpellate the subject (Althusser, 1984:15-51). Similarly, Kristeva claims that the free subject "has become a mirage". She argues that changes affecting family life; the entrance of women into the workforce, the increasing divorce rate, the collapse of paternal authority, the modern economic crisis and the reign of the image, thwart the oedipal configuration. Because the resolution of this configuration has been the precondition for a child's

access to language and thought, and a subsequent autonomy and development of morality, competitiveness, and creativity, the result has been various types of alienation, or “new maladies of the soul”, which have been characterised by the loss of the capacity to elaborate and communicate an inner life (Kristeva, 2000:127-29).

In spite of the crisis of subjective autonomy, there has been an ever-increasing social dominance of liberal ideals relating to the self. A direct result of this has been the phenomenon of social narcissism, characterised by a widespread neurotic withdrawal into the self. Christopher Lasch maintains that the culture of competitive individualism “in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war against all, the pursuit of happiness to the end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self” (Lasch, 1979:xv). A sense of disillusion in the face of such narcissistic tendencies permeates and binds Moretti’s cinema. Paradoxically, Moretti attacks these corrupting forces through a narrative internalisation around the core of an egoistic character. From this neurotic narrative focus emanates a harrowing sense of displacement, which manifests itself in Moretti’s cinema on social, political and personal levels.

Moretti’s self-reflexive and ironic cinematic language has both a critical and therapeutic purpose. Confronted by a fragmented world full of tragic and innate inconsistencies, humour and self-irony constitute the relevant critical means for an attempt at resistance or at least a level of comprehension.⁶ Manuela Gieri asserts that, “in opposition to comicality

⁶ Moretti, interviewed in 1993, added, “Forse sto solo cercando di capire dove va questa generazione. Però con due punti fermi: uno senza troppi compiacimenti, senza troppi lamenti. Infatti io credo che quando si parla di se stessi l’ironia e quindi l’autoironia sia obbligatoria [...]”

and tragedy, and as a result of the juxtaposition of both, humour is profoundly transgressive” (Gieri, 1995:71). According to Millicent Marcus, it disrupts and destabilises our established responses to experience and is therefore “a profoundly subversive force, challenging us to question received wisdom both on the level of ideology and aesthetic convention.” For Marcus, its finality is “liberating laughter” (Marcus, 2002:268). Similarly, in the films of Moretti humour provides a challenging and subversive poetic principle with a unique capacity for sharp personal and social criticism.

Umberto Eco remarks that in comedy we laugh at the character that breaks the rule, the set of social values, or in other words, the frame. In tragedy, we sympathise with the character that has broken the frame but enjoy the reaffirmation of the rule. In humour, we smile because of the inherent contradiction between the character and the frame. However, Eco stresses that we are no longer certain that the character is at fault. Possibly, the frame itself is wrong. Eco maintains that by refiguring the binary opposition between the character and the rule in a dialectic and open-ended fashion, humour acts as a form of social criticism and, thus, as opposed to comedy, is truly transgressive (Eco, 1984:8). Indeed, Moretti’s cinema magnifies the asymmetry of the frame of life, displaying a special understanding of the cosmic irony that lies at the root of existence, and which undermines human reason as the bastion of progress.

The self-lacerating quality of Moretti’s humour also explores the consequences of a pathological narcissism which stems from self-hatred. Michele Apicella displays signs of this form of narcissism in both *Bianca*

l’unica maniera di prendersi sul serio [è] prendersi in giro. All’inverso se ci si prende troppo sul serio poi si diventa ridicoli” (Gieri, 1995:225-26).

(1984) and *Ecce bombo*. In *Bianca*, he reacts with disgust when Bianca, his lover, classifies him as a “good man”, responding, “Che discorsi. Sei impazzita. Io buono!” Similarly, in *Ecce bombo*, when his casual girlfriend criticises him for terminating their relationship due to his fear of future emotional pain, Michele responds with a rehearsed sense of anguish, “Lo so, mi disprezzo, sono fatto male, come sono fatto male!” Lasch classifies such false self-consciousness and nervous and self-deprecating humour as behavioural traits of the narcissist (Lasch, 1979:31-33). These narcissistic traits serve to clarify Michele’s fundamental incapacity to constructively deal with his problems. This fact is reinforced in the following shot displaying a pathetic Michele who is assailed by a growing aggressive frustration as he unsuccessfully attempts to make his bed. A clear conceptual association between the final words of the previous shot, “Come sono fatto male”, and the pitiful image of Michele hopelessly trying to make his bed, creates a humorous link between his paradoxical incapacity to either establish healthy and lasting relationships or be independent.

Moretti’s cinema speaks about the way in which the “culture of narcissism” undermines the stability and depth of amorous relationships. Lasch writes that both of the sexes

[...] have come to approach personal relations with a heightened appreciation of their emotional risks. Determined to manipulate the emotions of others while protecting themselves against emotional injury, both sexes cultivate a protective shallowness, a cynical detachment they do not altogether feel but which soon becomes habitual and [embittering]. (Lasch, 1976:194)

In *Ecce bombo*, Michele's relationships do indeed suffer from these corrosive tendencies. After Michele splits up with Silvia, he initiates two other shallow relationships in which mutual love is never expressed. A breakdown of communication is emblematic of these terminal problems of emotional superficiality. The dialogue about the prospect of sex carried out by Michele and the beautiful and "intimidating" Flaminia, the wife of Michele's friend Cesare, captures this breakdown with precision:

M: [...] pensavo che fosse impraticabile come ipotesi. Ma è impraticabile?

F: Non capisco cosa c'è sotto.

M: Cosa c'è sotto?

F: Non lo so, l'ho domadato a te. Dipende da se c'è un motivo.

M: Il motivo è in se stesso e con te sto bene.

F: Ma che stai bene? Ci siamo visti una volta e già dopo un'ora te ne sei scappato. Già comunichiamo così poco figuriamoci facendo l'amore.

M: E non so se c'entra, sai? Va be', ormai ne abbiamo parlato talmente tanto.

F: Però non capisco il vero motivo. Se c'è un motivo non vedo perché sì, se non c'è non vedo perché no.

M: Come sì e no? Non ho capito.

F: Se c'è un motivo per cui tu mi hai chiesto di fare l'amore. Se c'è non lo facciamo. Se non c'è non vedo perché non dovremmo.

(Close up of Michele who blinks with perplexed eyes)

If we consider the fact that language is the link between the subject and the external world, this scene takes on an existential significance. Instead of providing a transparent medium which connects, language is demonstrated to be ambiguous and separating. Moretti's cinema

constantly explores the issue of the existential and political centrality of language. In *Palombella rossa* (1989) the impoverishment of language in consumer culture and the negative effect that this has on the quality of human experience is a central theme. In one scene, Michele, who is now an amnesiac leader of the Italian Communist Party seeking to piece together his lost identity and ideology, is ‘assaulted’ by the empty and clichéd language of a journalist. With the utterance of each manufactured phrase Michele contorts in physical pain, and when he is unable to bear any more he shouts, “Come parla! Come parla! Le parole sono importanti!” and slaps her forcefully in the face twice. In a later encounter with the same journalist Michele reinforces the existential importance of language by declaring, “Bisogna trovare le parole giuste. Chi parla male pensa male e vive male.” By conveying the elusive nature of ‘authentic’ communication through a humoristic film language, Moretti’s films reinforce the subject’s difficulty of obtaining integration with the social world.

The critical efficacy of humour is palpable in another sequence of *Ecce bombo* which depicts the internal turmoil of Michele. Left isolated and apathetic during a Roman summer, he desperately attempts to telephone old school friends. After hanging up the phone, a cut from a close up to a long shot exhibits him dressed in briefs, exposed and vulnerable. After gesticulating in anguish he pauses reflectively and exclaims with obvious irony, “magari quindi qui al telefono pensano che io sia un disperato [...] hanno di me un concetto completamente sbagliato.” The following shot, in which he wanders vaguely around the kitchen in an agitated manner while eating, reinforces and punctuates Michele’s aimlessness and inner turmoil. His only visible link with the outside world is a window revealing an anonymous urban landscape.

The successive shot captures him at his desk reading the newspaper, a metaphor for his search for meaning in the world. Fittingly, the articles, which are read out by Michele in a dry manner, deal with banal and trivial subjects. Obviously fed up with his shallow connection with the external world, he instinctively picks up a bell and begins to ring it, first intermittently and then continuously. The bell cries like an extension of his haunted soul and is representative of the lack of communication with his social world, reminding us of a doorbell or telephone ring. The potential for communication, like the bell itself, is in his hands but sadly only he can hear its sound. After a cut, the piercing ring melts into the desolate scream of Michele who, with his slouched back facing the camera, simultaneously slams his fist repeatedly on the desk.

In the next shot, this interior torment is transported to the political and social sphere. With a subtle comical sense of stony-faced bewilderment reminiscent of Buster Keaton, of whom he symbolically has a poster on his bedroom wall, Michele happens to find himself in the midst of a listless youth-organised rock music and alternative theatre demonstration which ironically has the slogan 'Riprendiamo la vita'. Bewildered, he stops to survey the pitiful scene of sparse young spectators who even in their attempts to be together apathetically lie about consumed by a sea of tears.⁷ Thus, the emphasis of the sequence has shifted from self-irony to the satire of Moretti's own generational and political context.

⁷ Ginsborg writes that the youth movement of 1977 was motivated by the desire for collective company or to 'stare insieme'. Initiated by young people who were disaffected from traditional politics and unwilling or unable to find regular employment, the youth movement involved a variety of cultural activities including concerts. Eventually, "Most of this section of youth swelled the ranks of the *riflusso*, the great retreat into private life, the abandonment of collective action, the painful coming to terms with failure" (Ginsborg, 1990:381-3).

The sequence's final frame shows the absurd mimic representation of some street artists, which bitterly alludes to Michele's alienation from his social world. A mime artist with white face make-up performs the actions of someone looking up numbers and telephoning, as Michele had done previously. His contradictory nature, simultaneously defined by a comical appearance and melancholic behaviour and by theatricality and communicative rigidity, mirrors that of Michele. The mime signifies the social gesturing of Michele's body throughout the sequence (and the entire film), and calls to mind the poster of the mimic Buster Keaton which adorns Michele's bedroom wall. The loneliness and social estrangement of one individual becomes representative of a whole generation and the poetic symmetry of the sequence from start to finish, and its interweaving of the private and public spheres, defines the doubled and critical artistic disposition of the film.

The challenging nature of this often-bitter *umorismo* is pronounced in *Bianca*. In this film, Michele sees the world only in black and white. After declaring that when he chooses to love he chooses forever, he becomes psychotic when his uncertain surrounding world betrays his idealistic view of love. Again, his underlying self-hatred and fear of emotional pain inhibits him from forming a fulfilling love relationship. Fromm defines love as the only "passion which satisfies [one's] need to unite [oneself] with the world, and to acquire at the same time a sense of integrity and individuality" (Fromm, 1991:30). Thus, love can be seen as the only phenomenon capable of providing a certain de-alienating quality. Michele's obsessive belief in absolute and eternal love, and his fear of failed relationships, paradoxically impedes him from establishing and maintaining amorous relationships. Ultimately, these factors push him to murder his friends and neighbours, in a Jekyll and Hyde manner, for their infidelities and marital failings. Kaplan in fact outlines the need of the

alienated individual “to compel others to conform to [...] their own reason and needs”. Any individual who fails to do this, she explains, “reveals itself as alien and invites destruction” (Kaplan, 1976: 195). This observation is strikingly relevant to *Bianca*.

The underlying aggression displayed by Moretti’s characters, which is predominantly directed towards friends and family, is a fundamental aspect of Morettian humour. This frustration also manifests itself in hysterical outbursts, obsessive behaviours, infantile regressions and neuroses. The often random and irrational nature of these disturbances is both characteristic of their innate permanence and the fact that they are hidden under the fragile surface of ‘normality’ and social and psychological stability. Such manifestations represent the fundamental duality of the human being who must at some stage undergo pain and sorrow to feel truly alive. Outside of this existential irony the human being would not exist, and only through recognition of this intrinsic imperfection can one hope to overcome problems and internal conflicts in an attempt to improve.

Moretti, who emphasises the need for real physical blows in his cinema, describes the tendency to physical and verbal aggressiveness and frustration as “una specie di desiderio inconsapevole di farsi del male” (cited in Ranucci and Ughi, 2001:53). This representation of physical violence involves a clear break with comic traditions of slapstick and, when contrasted with the underlying emotional fragility and infantile regressions of Moretti’s characters, it poignantly conveys the painful marrow of existence. This disturbing aspect of Moretti’s films is, in turn, linked to the internal splitting provoked in the spectator who reflexively, yet uneasily, smiles or laughs at such histrionic on-screen behaviour. This sense of discomfort stems from compassion, an emotion whose origins lie

in a level of identification that is impossible without recognition of one's *own* vulnerability.

In Moretti's films violence and aggression originate from a sense of fragility and impotence and reveal an attempt at rediscovering a sense of order. Returning to *Bianca*, the other side of Michele's violence is revealed in a much cited, surreal sequence. Tormented by his growing love for Bianca and unable to sleep by her side, Michele gets out of bed and wanders off naked to the kitchen. A cut captures him eating an enormous jar of Nutella with childlike compulsion. The unreal enlargement of this object, a visual technique often used in Moretti's cinema, highlights the oneiric subjectivity of the image and, thus, Michele's internal disorder. In Moretti's films, the process of eating sweets can be seen to symbolise a search for the emotional comfort and wholeness of existence associated with childhood.

This infantile nostalgia, which repeatedly finds voice in Moretti's cinema, must be considered in relation to the disharmony between subject and world that is so central to his work. If this relationship is governed by the loss of meaning resulting from the predominance of mass-culture and its overwhelming tide of clichés, then, in turn, the time of childhood can be seen to represent an ideal period of relative utopia. Despite the increasing interpellation of children through advertising and discursive subject positions, a sense of meaning and contentment can also be dramatically simple for a child, to be found in a jar of Nutella (*Bianca*), or in Don Giulio's little red ball from childhood (*La messa è finita*).

Conversely, such infantile desires and behaviour are also indicative of an underlying fragility. In *Io sono un autarchico*, Michele manipulates a family scene, like the director of a soap opera, by secretly ordering his

young son to sulk at his mother's decision to separate. This artificial situational dramatisation is typical of Michele's attempts to conceal his true sentiments. Whereas his son barely manages a fake pout, Michele abruptly bursts into tears, his immaturity and guilt exposed. This scenario, which forces the spectator to laugh at Michele's misery, is potently humorous. In *Palombella rossa* (1989), childlike tendencies are tied to Michele's crisis of existential and political identity. In an attack of confused hysteria Michele laments, "Noi siamo uguali agli altri. Ma siamo diversi. Ma siamo uguali agli altri. Ma siamo diversi [...] Mamma mamma, vienimi a prendere!" Cremonini identifies a link between the nostalgia for infancy of Moretti's characters and the critical comic gaze of his cinema. He states that this nostalgia causes "lo spirito infantile dello sguardo narrante" to mix with "la duplicità caricaturale di un personaggio che è al stesso tempo infantile e adulto" (Cremonini, 1999:49).

The feeling of political estrangement that runs through Moretti's work reaches its apex in *Aprile* (1998). Powerlessness and disbelief are conveyed with humour after entrepreneur and media magnate Silvio Berlusconi's electoral victory in 1994. Nanni, Moretti's first person character, is seen watching the inconceivably real speech of Emilio Fede, appearing on Berlusconi's own channel. This speech highlights the obscene marriage between the worlds of politics and TV, the 'industry of the spectacle.' Fede unashamedly praises Berlusconi and his victory as if he were a celebrity. The only possible reaction left for Nanni in this painfully absurd situation is to smoke a surreally oversized joint, the first of his life, in front of his mother. This action manages to be only marginally ridiculous in comparison with the political reality and, thus, the farcical tragedy of Berlusconi's victory is clear. Again, as was the case in *Bianca*, internal confusion and turmoil are highlighted through the oneiric enlargement of the joint. Nanni's ensuing attempts to actively

involve himself in Italian political life throughout the film, by sending previously non-sent political letters and making a documentary about Italy's political landscape, ultimately fail. Ironically, however, Moretti's film succeeds in communicating much about the 'crisis' of Italian politics. The film also confirms the need to remain both critical and receptive.

Despite a particular cultural currency with late capitalist society, alienation is also an existential concern. Walter Kaufman declares that estrangement from nature, society, one's fellow humans and oneself is part of growing up because one "has to detach oneself from the womb of one's environment in order to become a person, individual, an independent being" (Kaufman, 1970:xiv). This understanding of the difficult process of maturation is particularly resonant in *Io sono un autarchico* and *Ecce bombo*. The latter traces the young Michele's existential frustrations, which often find voice in irrational outbursts against his family. In his social life we see him estranged both in the company of his friends and girlfriends. The same problems apply to his friends; one needs only think of the small deficient male self-consciousness group, in search of meaning, with which Michele involves himself. For Melvin Seeman, "meaninglessness refers to the individual's sense of the incomprehensibility of social affairs, whose dynamics one does not understand and whose future course one cannot predict" (Seeman, 1989:345).

Even when Moretti situates himself in the role of the priest Don Giulio, in *La messa è finita* (1985), who more than any other character should succeed in finding meaningful spiritual and social integration, alienation is paramount. The audience is provided with another harrowing example of a tension-ridden subject for whom terrestrial reality is irreconcilable with his own values of absolute love and Christian charity. For Don

Giulio, surrounding chaos provides a fragmented mirror which distorts his self-image and generates disenchantment. This lack of autonomy and coherence ultimately prevents him from fulfilling his duty as a spiritual advisor. Similarly, in *La stanza del figlio* (2001) psychoanalytical avenues fail to grant existence satisfaction both for Giovanni, a psychoanalyst, and his patients. In this film, when the Morettian subject seems to have finally achieved an adult life which is balanced, with a stable job and a loving family, this is tragically undermined by the death of his teenage son, Andrea. The film is another example of Moretti's ability to confront the uncontrollable cosmic ironies of existence head on.

Moretti's films provide an ontological body of work which, in using the poetic lens of a challenging and critical humour (*umorismo*), self-reflexively accentuates the ironies of life and the conflict between the subject and world. The exposition of the desires, sorrows and tastes of their director give Moretti's cinema an idiosyncrasy which serves to paint a portrait of life coloured by an intensely subjective, tragicomic and politicised point of view. Consequently, his cinema acts as a mirror in which the fractured and disturbed image of the alienated subject is reflected. Yet in spite of the undeniably personal specificity of his cinema, viewers are invited by these films to identify with an intense feeling of social and political estrangement and disenchantment, and through this identification, Moretti seeks to rouse a wider critical awareness.

(Monash University)

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