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Kaos

Taviani Brothers - Italy (1984)

Like many Italian filmmakers in the latter part of the 20th century, the Taviani brothers developed an ambiguous relationship with Italian neorealism over the course of their career. The post-war neorealism of Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti has in itself strong resonances with folk culture, in particular a tendency to give the stage to the 'lowered voices' of shoeshine boys, rubbish sweepers, fishermen and rural communities in the Po Delta.

Neorealism has been popularly conceived as a counter to the grand narratives of Italian fascism and Hollywood, drawing back the curtain to reveal the unheard voices of the 'real' Italy. Neorealist filmmaking also frequently prioritises a sense of 'choral' community perspective (in the chapter structure of *Paisa*, or the choirs of workers in *Riso Amaro*), and foregrounds a strong sense of dialect both literally in dialogue and figuratively through the casting of non-actors, use of real locations, and development of 'real life' story content. Indeed, Roberto Rossellini saw neorealism as having its roots in popular forms and modes of expression; "who can deny that it is [actors Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani] who first embodied neorealism? That the music-hall scenes of the 'strong men' or of 'Roman ditties' performed on a carpet or with the help of just one guitar, as they were invented by Magnani, or the figure portrayed on local stages by Fabrizi, already anticipated at times certain films of the neorealist period? Neorealism is given birth, unconsciously, by the film in dialect".

Referring to their relationship with neorealism as being like that of a son to a father, the Taviani brothers have described how "when we embarked on our career in the cinema we wanted to depart from neorealism, to make it react to something new and something old ... In this sense, we felt that we were burying a beloved father. Although this 'father' is dead and buried, he remains a strong influence in our memory". Whilst the Taviani brothers' first film (with its very Rossellinian title *San Minato 1944*) followed a fairly orthodox programme of neorealist documentary, 1984's *Kaos* is something very different, evoking a semi-mythic temporality, a sense of folk tale and magical realism, and a bustling choral perspective. Whilst it inherits from earlier forms of neorealism a sense of *people* as its *raison d'être* - of a *peopled* aesthetic - the film nonetheless modulates away from neorealism's rationalist aspirations of objective truth towards a greater subjectivity grounded in community perspective.

This trajectory from the orthodox neorealism of *San Minato 1944* to the magical-realist, multi-perspectival folk cinema of *Padre Padrone*, *Kaos*, *Fiorile* and *Night of Shooting Stars* resonates with the path trodden by the Italian writer Italo Calvino who similarly moved from an initial neorealist aspiration towards greater 'lightness of touch'; "from my first published works I was thought a 'realistic' writer; indeed, a neo-realistic one, the term then in use taken from the cinema ... I had made efforts to write the realistic-novel-reflecting-the-problems-of-Italian-

society, and had not managed to do so. (At the time I was what was called a ‘politically committed writer’). And then, in 1951, when I was twenty-eight and not at all sure that I was going to carry on writing, I began doing what came most naturally to me – that is, following the memory of the things I had loved best since boyhood.”

Calvino’s words share with the later cinema of the Taviani brothers both a sense of romantic nostalgia and a sense of reaching for an aesthetic of greater subjectivity and poetry. In these terms, it’s perhaps significant that both Calvino and the Tavianis would look, in different ways, to folk culture to inform their post-neorealist aesthetics. Milicent Marcus has described how the work of the Tavianis seems both to reference and modulate orthodox neorealism into new registers, particularly towards folk idioms of myth and superstition and multi-perspectival appeals to community lore and orality. Indeed, this neatly seems to mirror the ‘pagan naturalism’ and ‘fractured subjectivity’ described by Renate Holub as characteristics of Luigi Pirandello on whose short stories *Kaos* is based.

Considering the Tavianis work as a whole, *Night of the Shooting Stars*, *Fiorile*, and *Kaos* all seem to thematise a sense of storytelling and voice. Whilst taken from a literary source, *Kaos*’s multi-part, portmanteau structure conjures a sense of folk tale and multi-perspectival orality, a structure the Tavianis would later return to with the folk-tale compendium structure of *Fiorile*. You’re reminded of the salesman’s story of the lion in Timothy Neat’s *Play Me Something* in the way that *Kaos*’s stories beget other stories; the way that the implied ‘soft-edges’ of oral storytelling allow for digression, tangents and detours, and the interjections of listeners and interlocutors. At least three of *Kaos*’s episodes include stories within stories, each stretching back to an earlier temporality, creating a sense of the vertical consciousness of layered temporalities that John Lorne Campbell identified with Gaelic oral culture.

Another facet of the ‘folk epistemology’ of *Kaos* is its sense of magical realism. Pauline Kael described the Taviani’s *Padre Padrone*, with its talking sheep, whispering choirs and conversations between accordions and flutes, as being one of the world’s only truly ‘animist’ films. There is certainly a complex, layered sense in *Kaos* and *Padre Padrone* (and subsequently in *Night of Shooting Stars* and *Fiorile*) of Christian and pre-Christian practices entangled in community imagination and folk superstition; a simultaneous sense of the real and the fantastical that could perhaps be described as magical realism. *Play Me Something* director Timothy Neat has described how magical realists like Garcia Marquez channelled “the theatre of the folk imagination”, and there are abundant instances in *Kaos* – from Bata’s werewolf-like moonsickness, to the moon’s power over the oil jar – of the fantastical and the apocryphal incorporated into an otherwise realist aesthetic. It’s interesting to consider how on a purely cinematic level the Tavianis conjure the sense of a werewolf entirely through implication. There are no special effects, no ‘Hammer’ costumes or masks – just a hand at the window and a lone figure pulling frenziedly at a tree. Perhaps one of cinema’s most believable, realistic portraits of a werewolf!

Considered as a whole, *Kaos* has a remarkable sense of breadth and interconnection. Its stories (and the stories within its stories) all interweave in a manner that recalls the Rossellinian choral qualities of the Tavianis’ *Night of Shooting Stars*, which takes in the many perspectives of a broad community, and *Fiorile*, which similarly layers temporalities and interconnected myths in a family’s history. You’re reminded again of the Taviani’s sense of innovating as ‘sons’ upon a ‘father’ neorealism, and indeed *Kaos* also invites parallels with the Amber Collective’s remarkable *Dream On*, which similarly inflects and develops earlier models of British social realism to incorporate a greater sense of subjectivity, style and poetry.

Jamie Chambers / Folk Film Gathering