Chapter 6

Imagining Naples: The Senses of the City

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In this article I discuss two movies by the Italian director Mario Martone which illustrate the centrality of place in constituting an understanding of the self. In emphasizing the characters' links with the city of Naples, Martone provides a cinematic exploration of the workings of the past in the present as containing both an individual and a social reality. He uses the images and sensations of the city as an externalization of the protagonists' introspective fantasies, and, in so doing, presents the public arena as the repository of both individual and collective history. When Susan Sontag describes Walter Benjamin as "not trying to recover his past, but to understand it: to condense it into its spatial forms, its premonitory structures" (1979: 13), she identifies one of the many echoes that resonate between Martone's and Benjamin's own account of Naples, written in 1924.

A different strand in recent work on location and identity has involved some questioning of previously assumed links between place and the understanding of self. This work registers the transformation of perceptions of local and national, individual and collective ideas about self and other, occasioned by the dislocations, migrations, movements, and diasporas of the twentieth century. It emphasizes the modern condition as a universalizing experience which has had the effect of partially detaching the individual from any continuous sense that identity has connections with a particular place (Carter, Donald, Squires 1993; Morley and Robins 1993). Martone's two movies not only set the narratives in a particular city, they use images of Naples to represent personal, individual memory and to begin to think about the memories of past generations of Italians and a different Italy. In this way, they highlight some of the changes in Italian society since the Second World War.

A Neapolitan Director

Martone's first feature-length movie *Morte di un matematico napoletano* (hereafter *Death of a Neapolitan Mathematician*, 1990) is a movie with a distinctly local ambience organized around the symbolic importance of city space. His next film, *L' amore molesto* (1995), also assigns a primacy to the city. Both movies, through

their narratives and through their representation of Naples, explore the links between place and identity. The city is strongly signaled as desired, the intimate possession of a creative artist who has attempted to represent his own city, one with a strong, lasting grasp on the European imagination, in a distinctively different way. The massing of details, fragments, and impressions, as it were, from the inside, extends considerably the complex of associations brought to mind by the idea of "Naples". In this respect these movies form part of a more general cinematic, cultural, and political opening which happened in Naples during the 1990s.

The European art cinema has often been regarded as a tool for the elaboration of the personal issues of its directors as they are articulated through the creativity of movie making. (Bordwell 1985; Neale 1981). This tradition has emphasized the director as the authorizing presence and the condition of coherence for a form of moviemaking whose ambiguities often stress a self-conscious narration and an overt concern with psychological states.

The concentration on visual style, character, and the interiorization of dramatic conflict in Martone's two movies asserts the links between personal, psychological identity and its local and regional roots. Memory and time appear as possessing both personal and collective attributes and meanings. The crowded allusions to which they give rise, materially and geographically, but also mentally, form the focus for a set of interlocking concerns – the lives of the characters and their relation with the past of the city in the diegesis, the transformations in Naples, and in Italy, from the fifties to the nineties, and the director's younger self and interest in his city.

Each movie identifies one central character as its focus, a man in the first, a woman in the second. Through their encounters with themselves and their past in the streets of Naples, the city is established as the other major protagonist, a setting through which the emotions and conflicts of living are encountered, enacted, recognized/misrecognized, and thought about by the characters themselves, but also by the spectator. The shifting between past and present registered through physical locations becomes a visual rendering of states of mind, and of a process of self-realization. The characters, Renato the mathematician, and Delia the daughter, are played by two actors with long associations with Naples and with the theater. This offers Martone, a theater director himself, another area for exploration: the overlap of actor and role (Martone 1995: 14).

Versions of Naples

Some of Martone's themes in these first two feature-length movies mirror the preoccupations Sontag proposes as central to Walter Benjamin: "Benjamin had adopted a completely digested analytical way of looking at the past. It evokes events for the reactions to the events, places for the emotions one has deposited in the places, other people for the encounter with oneself, feelings and behaviour for intimations of future passions and failures contained in them" (1979: 9–13). Benjamin's own account of Naples written with his lover Asja Lacis, emphasizes "the interpenetration of buildings and action" (p. 169). Furthermore, "What distinguishes Naples from other large cities is that each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life; similarly dispersed, porous and commingled, is private life. To exist, for the northern European the most private state of affairs, is here a

collective matter. So the house is far less the refuge into which people retreat, than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out." (1979: 167).

This idea of Naples as a city which shapes private lives through the dominance of public spaces is an image which brings together architecture, geography, and people. Since the center of Naples contains one of the highest territorial densities in Europe, this further adds to a set of dramatically shifting parameters between lives conceived in conventional private terms and their existence in a public domain. Until the postwar period and the extension outwards of the speculation of the sixties, a geographical separation of poverty from wealth, a separation of classes in a separation of zones or areas, was strictly limited. In Naples it was one of higher and lower, with the rich above the poor, and the poor often, literally, below ground.

The vertical organization of Naples and the architectural choices that have followed its physical forms certainly contribute to the particular social relations identified by Benjamin, but Martone has mainly chosen not to represent this, just as other familiar images of the city – the volcano, the bay, the ruins of antiquity – are also absent from his movies.The touristic picture of Naples, part of a legacy predating the photograph and the film, stresses this combination of geographical, natural, and architectural features, and such associations have been the basis of many other cinematic representations, often shaping them as a kind of residuum of the folkloric (Bruno 1997: 47–9). Various commentators, including the director himself, have insisted that these movies represent an attempt to engage with an alternative tradition, and, by rendering Naples from the inside, to introduce another reality (Fofi 1997; Martone 1997).

In the first film, *Death of a Neapolitan Mathematician*, Naples appears uncharacteristically empty, in *L'amore molesto* it is full and noisy. In both, the encounter of character and city embodies the space of individual experience and precipitates the decisions following upon it. An intimacy and a distance between the two protagonists of each movie – the character and the city – are constructed by the camera's way of locating them relationally in the pro-filmic space. But this is also the construction of a mental space, a space of thought, rumination, association, and sensation first for the characters, then for the spectators. Artistic choices in the construction of the personal narratives emphasize them as narratives of the city. Naples emerges both as dream-like terrain and as a constellation of different and distinctive cultural arenas and groups, a visual reinforcement of the claim that "the mental and the social find themselves in practice in *conceived* and *lived* space" (Lefebvre 1996: 197).

In offering a sense of the very different lives of Neapolitans of different classes and genders in an earlier period and in the nineties, these movies stress the perception of what Lefebvre and Regulier (1986; reproduced in Kofman and Lebas 1996) have described as a city's "rhythms," as fundamental. In their delineation of some general characteristics of Mediterranean cities, "persistent historical links . . . fated to decline, to explode into suburbs and peripheries," they propose that such cities have more discernible rhythms than others, rhythms that are both "historical and daily", "closer to the lived" (p. 228).

Naples is an obviously Mediterranean city, a city of immense beauty and reputation, which has been pictured as containing and encouraging a fullness and extravagance, elsewhere already considered impossible or lost. The idea that lives of passion and melodramas of raw emotions exist in the midst of wretchedness,

squalor, and misery, condenses an array of beliefs, fantasies, prejudices, and expectations about "the Neapolitans." Naples, as a place where Europe' s Other is to be met within its own territory, is one of its most longstanding myths. It is often regarded as changing and loosening up the outsider who encounters the combination of city and people together (Goethe 1987, and many others). Martone's representation of a local Naples ultimately also serves to confirm this view.

The simultaneity of a visible past written into a present is one theme that Martone's movies develop, and one which links him directly with Roberto Rossellini who conveys a similar sense of Naples in *Viaggio in Italia* (1953). Starring his then wife Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders, this study of a marriage and how it was affected by a northern couple's exposure to Naples and its environs, made the city and its environs the other character whose influence becomes decisive. Bazin said of this movie, "It is a Naples filtered through the consciousness of the heroine. . . . Nevertheless, the Naples of the movie is not false . . . It is rather a mental landscape at once as objective as a straight photograph and as subjective as pure personal consciousness (quoted in Brunette 1987: 160). In *Viaggio*, Catherine's (Bergman's) journey becomes that of the spectator (Kolker 1983: 132) and in each of Martone's movies something similar is involved. *Death of a Neapolitan Mathematician* is a loose interpretation of the last week of the life of Renato Caccioppoli (1904–59), a well-known mathematician, the son of a Neapolitan surgeon and a woman known as the daughter of the Russian anarchist Bakhunin. Renato was a well-known intellectual and political figure, with a colorful history, first of antifascism, and later, of relations with the Italian Communist party (PCI). Played by the Tuscan stage actor Carlo Cecchi, who has a long association with Naples, Renato is shown at work and at meetings in the university, in restaurants, at the opera, with friends, comrades, ex-wife, brother and, crucially, alone. Warmth, concern and conviviality in the life of a leftist bourgeois intellectual in the fifties are set beside the solitude of the man and his progressive withdrawal from the world around him. The passing of the days of his last week lived within the streets and spaces of the old center of Naples provides the film's structure, and a certain labyrinthine aspect of the city conveyed through the streets and the angles of the buildings, becomes the condition of its representability.

L'Amore molesto is based on a book by Elena Ferrante. It recounts the events following the return to Naples of Delia/Anna Buonaiuto, a designer of comics living in Bologna. Delia returns the day after her birthday on hearing the news of her mother Amalia's mysterious death in the sea. The daughter seeks out the facts of her mother's last few days, meets up with her father, her uncle, a petty criminal type – her mother's possible long-term lover – and his son, her childhood companion. She imagines, remembers, invents, and encounters her loved, known mother, along with other possible mothers and other possible selves. It is the return to Naples which proves decisive for this engagement with the past and its shaping of her present and future. The film's notionally investigative structure is a personal journey in which a noisy, modern Naples is the setting for a fraught internal encounter. The encounter with the mother in the mind is occasioned by the encounter with the city, a city often associated with the maternal and the feminine (Gribaudi 1996; Ramondino 1991).

In the spaces of its buildings and streets, its language and its sounds, its inhabitants and their customs, its relationship to an illustrious set of traditions, and its place

in a national culture (although, in the case of the latter, it is largely to be inferred from the well-nigh complete absence of any explicit reference to it) a city which is simultaneously local and particular, national and general is pictorialized. In the first movie the status of Naples as an intensely cosmopolitan city ties it to a particular Italian and European past. In the second, local intensities, bodies, words, sounds, and images are immersed in the more general anonymity of shops, transport, cars, and crowded streets. The appropriation of the body of one by the eye of another, and of course the eye of the camera, is common to both, but, in the first, the concentration of looks is more from camera and spectator to (male) actor and city; in the second, the looks at, and between, the characters, especially at Delia, the heroine, record an invasive intimacy, a visual aggression and an awareness of bodies through a regime of looking that renders the physicality and sensuality of Naples through an explicitly hierarchical relation between the sexes.

As a central component of both movies, time figures in three different ways. There is the severely proscribed time in which the events of each narrative emerges – a week in the first film, two days in the second; the pace of the movies – slow thoughtful, distanced, and introspective in the case of the first, frenetic, noisy, overbearing, and externalized in the second. Finally there is the presence of an earlier historical era within the temporality of each movie. Through this juxtaposition of a filmic present, and a remembered past, the different renderings of time make available different ways of living and thinking. "Pastness" forms an intractable aspect of Mediterranean cities and their associations, and this is utilized by Martone as the terrain for a kind of public and personal memoir where the past both facilitates and constrains the life of the present.

Death of a Neapolitan Mathematician

In *Death* the movie reveals a Naples of the fifties, still existent today, a living recollection, in stone and buildings, of a different Naples and a different Italy from that of the movie's construction. Renato's visual confinement within a small area of the city center suggests the mathematician's despairing evaluation of his life and himself, but Martone's use of an intensely personal Naples makes the overall mood one of nostalgia rather than despair. Piantini (1993) sees the civility and behavior of family and friends and the shots of Naples which express such conviviality and warmth as creating a regret for the passing of the fifties. The movie is shot in a golden light, described by Roberti (1992) as a permanent sunset, and its color spectrum provides a setting of gentleness, luminosity, warmth, and beauty, that is markedly at odds both with the suicide of the hero and with the associations of enclosure and entrapment sometimes conveyed by the camera angles. It lends support to the sense in which thinking about the life of the man is the occasion for an essay about the city and its past, and the director and his. For the character Naples is ultimately confining, loving but irrelevant.The man of thought, mathematics, politics, music, culture is permanently clad in an old raincoat that echoes the feel of the street and the color of the buildings. "Fantastic reports by travellers have touched up the city. In reality it is grey: a grey red or ochre, a grey-white. Anyone who is blind to forms sees little here" (1992: 169). Martone explained the film's color as the suggestion of Bigazzi, the cinematographer, who, in sorting out locations, had

been struck by the yellowness of Naples. "I was immediately convinced because this yellow seemed to gather together another instance of the double aspect of the city, the comforting yellow of the sun's rays, and the pallid dusty yellow of illness" (1992: 132). The emptiness and silence may act as signifiers of the inner despair of the man, but, paradoxically, they register the richness and beauty of the city itself.

The local sites in this movie are mostly confined to a particular area of Naples, that of Via Partenope, Via Chiaia and the Spanish quarter. Palazzo Cellamare, where the protagonist, Renato Cacciopoli, lived, is shot from inside, outside, by night, by day; a constant visual reference. It may have once been the home of Goethe, but, far more significantly, Martone himself lived his adolescence there, and it is still his family home. His Naples, like that of his mathematician, is part of the intense intellectual artistic, musical, and commercial culture that has long distinguished the city; but it is not one that has seen much cinematic attention. "How is a field of memory formed? It needs frontiers, milestones, seasons . . . Otherwise, days flood in, each erasing the previous one, faces are interchangeable, pieces of information follow, and cancel one another. It's only in a defined space that there is room for an event, only in a continuum that beginnings come into view and ruptures occur" (Pontalis 1993: 79).

Martone's use of the city/person connection in this movie depends upon an inversion of the traditional theatricality and spectacle of Naples, mentioned by Benjamin, but the movie echoes him in another: "buildings and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations" (1992: 169). As Renato withdraws, the city becomes the theater for the staging of the troubled mind of a ruined political and intellectual hero and it is no suprise that Renato is reading Beckett with friends the night before his death.

L'Amore Molesto

The second movie makes the modern anonymous city the external impetus for the uncovering of a particular personal history which is part of a social one. The story of Delia, her mother, and family figures is also an account of a Naples of women's work, men's violence and jealousy, of poverty, postwar shortages and hardship, and of the differences and similarities between the nineties and earlier decades. While the wish that guides the narrative of *L'amore molesto* appears as the clarification of the circumstances of the mother's death, questions of past and present are here laid, the one upon the other, from sequence to sequence, in an attempt to capture the fluidity and apparent randomness of individual mental processes through the cinematic codes of editing and color.

L'amore molesto contains a fantasy or a memory of a possible past event, but, overall, this seems less significant than the more general accession of Delia to her younger self through the recollection of a former Naples and the encounter with a present one, both ordered on gendered lines. The gestures, assumptions, and behavior of the old men seem ludicrous and inappropriate, but their continuity in relations between the sexes is underlined by the persistent looking of the young men in the streets and on public transport. The fantasies, memories, recollections, flashbacks, the status of the possible personal pasts of the protagonist, Delia, remain

open, and in this too, the film's structure offers an analogy with the mind and the kaleidoscopic transformations provoked in fantasy by memories. That they originate in a vital, gutsy Naples does nothing to detract from this oneiric sense.

The relation of past and present in the second movie is a complexly shifting affair; the female character involves a less directly personal dimension for the director, and the movie inscribes a Naples described by him as "sometimes unknown disquieting and foreign" (Martone 1995), a Naples of the margins, not only the geographical margins – Delia's father lives in the periphery – but peopled with the old, whose language, gestures, and behavior Martone has identifed as setting them apart "like an ancient tribe barricaded inside the hostile modern city" (1995).

Noise is one of the most notable elements of contemporary Naples and constant sound is the accompaniment of most of the second film, especially its exterior scenes.The sounds of dialect and the level and timbre of the voices, together with the omnipresence of the car and other modes of transport, carry the sensation of the modern city. The exceptions are the scenes signaled as memory and the past. In *L'amore molesto* the physical and architectural aspects of Naples more often appear in Delia's memories, most of which are staged below ground, a reference to the social conditions of her family, though also available to a symbolic reading given the film's engagement with memory.

A cool color spectrum is employed throughout, and in the tinted sequences that signify memory or recollection or fantasy, Amalia, the mother, is always in blue except in the scenes of her death, imagined by Delia on the rail journey away from Naples. In them, Amalia, wearing the red lingerie the old admirer had returned to the daughter earlier in the film, dances round a fire on the beach, first laughing, then crying, finally walking into the sea as the old man sleeps. Delia imagines these scenes of her mother's enjoyment, and discovers a facet of her own, as, once more dressed in the gray/blue suit, she shares the beer offered to her by the young men.

This is one of the few Italian movies to feature the mother-daughter relation and it makes its embeddedness in Naples central, so that a general interrogation of the maternal and what it means also runs through the film. "There still exists today a series of stereotypes in the Italian imagination; Naples as a female city, a belly city, a city of the heart: in short, a mother city... the city willingly accepts the image of mother which is frequently assigned to it" (Niola 1994, quoted and translated by Green 1999). A fantasy of shifting identifications in the condensation of memories, events, and sexual encounters of both mother and daughter is continually alluded to through their clothes. The mother's birthday present was a clinging red dress which Delia wears for most of the film, replacing the gray/blue suit in which she arrived. In fantasy, and in the time of the film, red and blue garments move between mother and daughter, paralleling visually the intricacies of the relationship. For Delia/Anna Buonaiuto, encountering the city and its inhabitants forces a revisiting of her mother, and herself, and her own past. The intensity of the individual situation emerges through the amalgam of social meanings, experiences and knowledge comprised in the images of the city.

In its public spaces, after an absence of three years, and immediately following her mother's death, Delia becomes a sexualized body, almost as a present from her mother. Her decision to wear the dress is queried by her old uncle, "We've just buried your mother!" She replies, "Don't you like it? I was depressed. I wanted to give

myself a present." In this dress the female protagonist negotiates the streets of Naples and her own mind, as it gathers around her the accumulated connotations of such a garment. Putting it on parallels the revival of memories of family and self, but it also bequeaths to Delia a sexual persona and a bodily enjoyment. In it, the relation with the dead mother and with her own and her mother's sexuality is revived.

An economy of sex is introduced in the stark contrast of the individualized woman's body and the masses of other bodies, and Bo reads the corporeality of Naples as the frame across which *L'amore molesto*'s taking on both of bodies and of love develops (1997: 15). It is this connectedness that the movie appears to insist upon, even in the midst of the everyday violence of the remembered domestic scenes. Through the involvement in the city as repository of her past life and that of her family, especially her mother, Delia's own life appears to become a life more vital and available for living. The exchanges between mother and daughter and their inscription in the red garments propose a potentially conservative and unchanging account of the place of sexuality in the lives of these women of different generations – Delia, after all, inherits her mother's position as the object of the look – yet what is released by the mother's death and the daughter's return appears as the possibility of a fuller life rather than its opposite. That Naples and the South should be its propeller contributes to those myths about the transformations that city has been associated with facilitating.

Conclusion

In *Civilisation and its Discontents* Freud first imagines (1930: 70) the layering of one famous Rome upon another as paradigmatic of the mind, but then dispenses with the possibility of the city as metaphor and rejects the idea that, outside the mind, the same space can contain different contents. Through the visual evocation of Naples in different decades as they are held in the characters' individual memories, Martone establishes the link between place and person over time and offers an exploration of the relation between body and mind, feeling and thought. Like Freud's Roman ruins, the residues and results of individual and collective mental life are evident in the filmed spaces of the city.

Apart from period, the past these movies explore is radically other in terms of class, cultural norms, and customs, quarters of the city, family relations, sex, and intellect.

Martone speaks of the double aspect of Naples: warmth and generosity, and harshness and toughness; and the two movies, in revolving around the one or the other, offer a double-sided vision of the city (Roberti 1992: 130). The fluctuating aspects of masculinity and femininity, and of what might be called the maternal function, are represented as a quality of the city itself, where, like human sexuality, there is little neat confinement or traditional division between rationality, the mind, and the male (ostensibly the territory of *Death*), and emotionality, the body, and the female (that of *L'amore molesto*).

The different emotional registers constitute an ongoing investigation of life and living, as complexly inscribed in the the simultaneity in the mind, of a person's past and present places. But Martone also claims that the individual trajectories of these

characters offer access to "the sense, feel, atmosphere of Naples," something he sees as residing "not in ethnic roots, but in the movement between the people of the city, given through its cinematic representation" (Addonizio 1997: 341).

The lives of the two protagonists may be incommensurable in terms of family and domestic life, but the rhythms of Naples and of the South are consistent across the cinematic imaging. Language, cityscapes, noise, bodies, the presence of death – the first movie ends with a funeral, the second begins with one – reveal, at the same time, a regional city of the South, and an Italian city like any other. In the emotional geography the movies map, external differences shape internal scenarios, locally and nationally.

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