



MAGICAL REALISM: THE FILM FABLES OF THE TAVIANI BROTHERS

Good Morning Babylon

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Directors: Paolo Taviani, Vittorio Taviani

Production Companies: Filtre, MK2

Productions, Edward R. Pressman Film Corporation, RAI, Films A2, Cinecittà [1985]

Executive Producers: Edward R. Pressman, Marin Karmitz

Producer: Giuliani G. De Negri

Associate Producers: Lloyd Fonvielle, Caldecot

Chubb, Milena Canonero, Marina Geffer Cervi

Unit Managers: Claudio Gaeta, Livia Leto

Production Manager: Tommaso Calevi

Production Supervisor (France):

Catherine Lapoujade

Production Supervisor (US): John Engel

Post-production: Mario Milani

Assistant Director: Mimmola Girosi

Screenplay: Paolo Taviani, Tonino Guerra, Vittorio Taviani

Original idea: Lloyd Fonvielle

Director of Photography: Giuseppe Lanci

Camera Operator: Fabio Conversi

Glass shots: Franco Angeletti,

Stefano Angeletti, Vincenzo Forletta

Editor: Roberto Perpignani

Art Director: Gianni Sbarra

Assistant Set Dresser: Gino Passanisi

Sculptures and Models: Raffaello Giunta,

Paolo Lazzari

Costumes: Lina Nerli Taviani

Wardrobe: Anna Nerli

Make-up Head: Gianfranco Mecacci

Make-up Assistant: Claudio Meniconi

Music: Nicola Piovani

Music Performed by:

Orchestra Unione Musicisti di Roma

Music Recording: Sergio Marcotulli,

Forum Studios (Rome)

Choreography: Gino Landi

Sound Supervisor: Michael Billingsley

Sound Recording: Carlo Palmieri

ADR Recording: Sandro Pallottini, Fono Roma

Sound Re-recording: Fausto Ancillai

Sound Editor: Sandro Peticca

Assistant Sound Editor: Giovanna Ritter

Special Sound Effects: Cine Audio Effects,

Alvaro Gramigna, Fernando Caso

Dialogue Coach: Frank von Kuegelgen

Dialogue Consultant/Subtitles: Gene Luotto

Cast:

Vincent Spano (*Nicola*)

Joaquim de Almeida (*Andrea*)

Greta Scacchi (*Edna*)

Désirée Becker (*Mabel*)

Omero Antonutti (*Bonnano*)

Charles Dance (*D.W. Griffith*)

Bérangère Bonvoisin (*Mrs Griffith*)

David Brandon (*Grass*)

Brian Freilino (*Thompson*)

Margarita Lozano (*The Venetian*)

Massimo Venturiello (*Duccio*)

Andrea Prodan (*Irish cameraman*)

Dorotea Ausenda

Ugo Bencini

Daniel Bosch

Renzo Cantini

Marco Cavicchioli

Fiorenza D'Alessandro

Lionello Pio Di Savoia

Maurizio Fardo

Domenico Fiore

Mirio Guidelli

John Francis Lane

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In contrast to that movie radicalism which springs from some marriage of Marx and Hollywood, the Tavianis belong to a solid, mature, and non-schizophrenic position. Several of their films powerfully explore the competing options within Italian Communism and its ultra-lefts. Their latest production, filmed mainly in English, evokes Rosi's *Carmen* and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (and Godard's new-found respect for the Virgin Mary) in its degree of sympathy for reactionary passions and commitments, and in foregoing their 'deconstruction'. Not that the faintest 'Hooray for Hollywood' is heard throughout this film, which celebrates that early American cinema which the Hollywood system smashed. And it's a vanished Los Angeles which is conjured up here (from largely Italian locations), with its bright streetcars and well-watered forest. These primitive film stages, largely cloth-sided on wooden chassis, evoke some nomadic circus encampment, and these Hollywood actors still party by country-dancing, like the European peasants they so recently were.

The film abstains from primary moralism about that pat scapegoat, 'the patriarchal family', preferring a subtler casuistry about its strength and narrowness, its nobility and repressions. These three men maintain their distance – defying family unity against the hazards of separation (alienation, social atomism) and of closeness (envy, jealousy) alike. That unity drives the film's 'parallel action' – between California and Tuscany, between the cathedral and film media – thus evoking the era-spanning montage of *Intolerance*, the film within this film. Here then are three attempts at transcending space, time and the separateness of our existences: the family line; the myth-making craft; and the sentimental idealisms linking Christianity with Griffith's film. That all three are negated by a 'bourgeois-nationalist' war is regulation Marxism. More interestingly, each strategy carries its built-in limitation. In particular, the father preaches equality, but only between these two sons, reserving for himself a quietly dictatorial place; whence, perhaps, that repressed resentment which erupts as Nicola's irrational, childish refusal to be a father to his own son.

The film opens ideological horizons far too wide for any reduction of the personal to the political. In the highly ambivalent finale, one dying brother, filming the other, tells him to smile, and gets the reply, 'I thought I was smiling'. In its context, this simple-seeming exchange is very richly wrought. It hits the limitations of cinematic primitivism, however charming it may be; the 'bourgeois' or, at least, complacent-optimistic convention of smiling at the camera; and the urge to make a 'good impression', even during an absurd death. But that interior, imaginary smile isn't merely a smile to camera; it's also a testimony to a son. It's a 'diary for Timothy'; it aims to welcome, to impress and inspire, a rising generation. As such, and as a will to dignity it asserts a truth *concealed* by the visual surface of the world. Which hits at two aesthetic mainstreams of the left: first, neo-realism as the revelation of social materialism (the Tavianis' own formation); and second, that *a priori* moralising whereby the futility of this death negates any personal striving towards posterity.

The 'animals' theme tends the same way. The human battlefield evokes the film's earlier melee, between pigs, buzzards and men. Love is meta-animal too; the brothers deliver their poetic effusions in cages. What finally shakes their solidarity is not those obviously 'capitalist' rivalries and anomies which the Hollywood-immigrant setting might suggest, nor yet some social injustice; but death in childbirth, an animal fact of life. The most blatant animal is that rampant elephant – whether as a bas relief in stone or a wooden skeleton with a collage of film posters for skin. Grinning, upright, it's as cheekily out of place in Rome (where it's Carthaginian, like the *Cabiria* story) as in Christianity, or in Hollywood-Babylon. It's a sort of Sphinx: pagan and priapic, yet also imperial and dynastic. Perhaps it's something in man – man being that animal which never forgets, and therefore must build towards a future. To be sure, it exists in the margins of life, as of the Griffith film; yet the sunlight, striking it, makes of that California forest a sacred grove. It's a reactionary fetish, and yet: isn't it that mischievous, mute drive to fertility that can subvert one ideology after another?

Ubaldo Lo Presti
Luciano Macherelli
Sandro Mellegni
Elio Marconato
Michèle Melega
Mauro Monni
Lamberto Petrecca
Diego Ribon
Antonio Russo
Giuseppe Scarcella
Leontine Snel
Egidio Termine
Francesco Tola
Pinon Toska
Robert Case *
Italy-France-USA 1987
118 mins
Digital (restoration)

Restored by Centro Sperimentale di
Cinematografia – Cineteca Nazionale and by
Cinecittà S.p.A. at the laboratory at
Cinecittà S.p.A.

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The Subversives I sovversivi

Fri 1 Mar 18:20; Tue 5 Mar 20:40

The Night of the Shooting Stars

La notte di San Lorenzo

Sat 2 Mar 15:45; Tue 12 20:20 + extended intro

by season curator Adrian Wootton

Good Morning Babylon

Good Morning, Babilonia

Sat 2 Mar 18:10; Thu 7 Mar 20:40

The Lark Farm La masseria delle allodole

Sat 2 Mar 20:40; Sun 10 Mar 18:15

The Meadow Il prato

Sun 3 Mar 12:30; Sat 9 Mar 18:20

Rainbow: A Private Affair Una questione privata

Fri 8 Mar 17:55; Mon 11 Mar 21:00

Leonora Addio

Sat 9 Mar 20:40; Wed 13 Mar 17:50

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Co-produced by

Cinecittà, Rome

CINECITTÀ

The monograph *Paolo & Vittorio Taviani*,
published by Cinecittà, and featuring an article by
season curator Adrian Wootton, will be available
during the season.

In a sense, the film oscillates between two invincible smiles: the elephant's unchanging grin, the dying brother's invisible pride. But the film's poetic-symbolic themes wonderfully interlace, fulfilling Hitchcock's desideratum: 'Isn't it a fascinating design? One could study it forever.' The theme of light unites the California sun (whose rising recalls the Italian father...), the brothers catching fireflies (light + birds), the studio floodlights. If the love letters 'rhyme' with birds, they also cheer the streetcar passengers, briefly inspiring a happy populism – Marx à la Minnelli, fragile, ephemeral, but sweet. And what better contrast to the connotations of birds than those down-to-earth artefacts, so important to immigrants: boots. The brothers spur themselves to escape a degrading job by shouting, 'One, two, buckle my shoe'; their next career decision, to miss a ferry, involves a complicated mixture of accident and make-believe about untied shoelaces; their duel with the production manager involves people being marched out of offices, drill-sergeant style; which presages the fatal battle's confusing alternation of advances and retreats.

None of these details is merely a passive corollary of its scene; each generates its little jolt, its little surprise, especially as underlined by the Tavianis' visual style, as exquisite as ever, from the first, forcefully flat shot of nine blind arches in a brick wall, to an in-depth *mise en scène* whereby a departing streetcar, briefly reappearing in the extreme distance, generates in us the poignant joy-pain of nostalgia. With what careful art fruit and wine bottles seem casually scattered along a table! While this very elaborate visual inlay derives from neo-realism's rich inspection of the world, its quality of composedness is highly conspicuous, as befitting the narrative's broad streaks of poetic fabulation. Notably, a tendency to 'two by two' symmetries and synchronisations peaks in the wildly coincidental encounter of the two brothers and a movie camera, all pat on cue for parallel deaths. As well as a poetic 'encapsulation', it's a sentimental extravagance à la Griffith; but filmed icily, à la Brecht.

The overall narrative is a loose chronicle, i.e., 'epic' in Brecht's sense. Unfortunately, the faltering of thrust and momentum which plagues that form is exacerbated by the Tavianis' visual dramaturgy, which privileges local (scenic) factors at the expense of an overall architectonic. It's also possible that 'epic' looseness actually requires reintegration by some external thesis, thus heightening the risks of imposing some Q.E.D.-type moral didacticism. The Tavianis are arguably the true heirs of Brecht's aesthetic, and their style intermittently evokes what Yvette Biro called the 'liturgical' quality of the Berliner Ensemble. Only the veteran Omero Antonutti, as the old patriarch, is poignant. The narrative appears to trace a thesis, rather than these characters' experiences and, without actually seeming imposed or false, to have no deep roots in these hopes, efforts and disappointments. Which is a usual flaw in Brechtian art, albeit the Tavianis' finesse, obliqueness, and absence of heavy pseudo-irony mark a radical advance on Brecht's own sensibility.

The Tavianis' rather distant, crystallised visuals often suggest a second, non-Brechtian source, the pictorialism of wistful solitude, notably, Clair and Dreyer; fittingly, for the narrowness of family condemns the brothers to a solitude for two. That all-pervasive sense of the brothers' social marginalisation helps explain why this story, which on paper could have an epic sweep, congeals into a skein of vignettes. Overall, the plot might evoke a director sometimes called 'the last Griffithian', King Vidor; it could almost be a recombination of *An American Romance* (for the immigrant theme), *Show People* (for a populist Hollywood), *The Big Parade* (for 'magic' meetings around European battlefields), and *War and Peace* (for matching a family saga with the huge futilities of history). The 'American' and 'Brechtian' strategies make a fascinating contrast, which might go on to call in question the refusal of certain radical aesthetics to countenance the 'American' expertise in combining violently sympathetic involvements with discriminating social criticism. Even if the Tavianis have not resolved all the problems of their alternative strategy, its development is vital, and their intellectually riveting, poetically fascinating film is blessedly free from the various streaks of decadence or hypersensitivity that haunt several Italian Marxist auteurs.

Raymond Durnat, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1987