

REVIEW ARTICLE

Public Space Between Politics and Society

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Angeli by Domenico Ciruzzi – short film – Italy, 1996 – Runtime 13 mins, English subtitles.

In 1996, Domenico Ciruzzi, a Neapolitan criminal lawyer with some relevant experience in theatre, cinema and television, directed a short film with English subtitles, and titled it *Angeli* (literally, Angels).

This work was recently debated in a public meeting attended by the author and held by the Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples, as part of an interfaculty cycle of seminars on ‘Cinema/architettura/identità: La città come istituzione’ (Cinema/architecture/identity: The City as an Institution). This discussion brought to mind Pardo and Prato’s intimation that ‘in a democracy, political authority is not established and maintained through the domination and the recognition of its legitimacy determines the strength of rulers’ authority on “legal and moral grounds”’ (Pardo and Prato 2010: 12). Furthermore, this debate gives me the opportunity to deal with some of the key-aspects shown by the relationship between citizenship and local cultural policies, when the use of public spaces is at stake.

Angeli is set in the main square of Naples, Piazza del Plebiscito, which had just been set free of parked cars, thus becoming an icon for the renaissance of the city. The new mayor, Antonio Bassolino, had just been elected and could count on a large majority in the City Council.

Three artists impersonate the main characters – a female trapezist and two male musicians, playing a flute and a drum. They talk to each other while floating in the empty space above the square. Their conversation takes place in supposedly elegant Italian, in fact revealing the expressive and aesthetic effort by people who usually talk in a different, more familiar language – Neapolitan.

The scene starts with a dolly shot on the night skyline of Naples, showing the Royal Palace façade and the Jolly Hotel tower, the latter symbolising the urban sprawl of the 1950s. Some images include the Vesuvius and Mount Somma, framed between the Royal Palace, on one side, and the Prefecture on the other, under a full moon glimpsing through clouds dotting and overall clear night sky. The wind blows and yet the main characters, played by three remarkable actors (Antonella Stefanucci, Riccardo Zinna and Tonino Taiuti), look steady set on an imaginary trapeze, engaged in a conversation that develops a thread of memory at times broken by the rhythm of music. They recall a time when they were headliners in the theatre scene, performing a show with music and acrobatics; a time when they were at the centre of an imaginary stage shaped by the fantasy of the audience against the natural background of the square. Yet, that memorable night something went wrong; perhaps because one of the two

musicians had forgotten to fasten the security hooks or because someone played a wrong tune at a key moment. So, what at first looks as a reflection, turns into a harsh everyday quarrel.

As time flows, the lives of the three main characters slip to the background, and at the end of the film they leave the square limping, while on the opposite side the camera moves behind and gets lost in a growing hum of screams and noises buzzing through the colonnade that borders one side of the semi-circular piazza. Then, the camera enters the closed space of a church, its doors are shut on the square, thus secluding it from the public space; a space, that is, other than ours.

This short film met a discrete success, especially from the critics. It was selected for Nanni Moretti's *Sacher Festival* and for the *N.I.C.E. Festival* (New Italian Cinema Events) held in New York and San Francisco. It won first prize at the 1996 *Fano Film Festival*.

Its main characters are only summarily portrayed. The acrobat is 'the most beautiful trapezist woman in the world' and, though the two musicians, Antonio and Riccardo, use the 'lei' courtesy form, they keep teasing and blaming each other for what happened; the real facts are never completely cleared up. 'How beautiful, how thrilling was that evening', the three characters say nostalgically, moving away from the square. We do not know whether they are dead or simply crippled by the fall on the fatal evening. Yet, other than the individual fate of the characters, the strongest visible element is the square, which provides the frame for the whole story and a mirror for the lack of integration between citizens and the public space. So Piazza del Plebiscito is not just the place where the story is set; it is, rather, a symbolic and visual magnet to which the whole cinematographic structure conceived by Ciruzzi refers.

This square has historically been used as a place for rejoicing, for encounters between the upper and lower classes, and for questioning the existing social structures and then redefining them in the ephemeral frenzy of popular shows and celebrations. Thus, the square has come to encapsulate key social dynamics, and has been used politically by the ruling powers. Contemporary art installations and New Year's Day celebrations have been regularly hosted in the Piazza del Plebiscito, and have been used by the city government to gather political consent. Ciruzzi's short film predicts this trend, which the city would then actually experience up to the beginning of the third millennium, when the financial crisis of the local governments and the failure of the most recent art installations, contributed to put an end this tradition.

In Ciruzzi's movie, the Piazza del Plebiscito, either empty or packed with acrobats, looks as a gem, set in the civic network, the latter perceiving the square as something alien. Indeed, at the end of the film, the church door is closed on the piazza, while the rest of the city lies inside, unchanged, without being explicitly represented.

In several newspaper interviews, Ciruzzi has stated that his work was aimed at saving the square from the temptation of a new kind of rhetoric. Naples's rulers were oriented to lingering in the fenced space of the Piazza del Plebiscito, forgetting the other parts of the city, such as the deprived outskirts or the popular *Quartieri Spagnoli* (Spanish Quarters), a few steps away from the square.

Ciruzzi was motivated by a deep love for his city, and by a strong enthusiasm for the so-called 'new renaissance' that Naples was experiencing in those days. Yet, the film aimed at

emphasizing the importance of the middle-class – office workers, teachers, librarians, artists, and people who were, perhaps still are, at once Naples' backbone and beating heart. They strive to preserve their dignity and to protect it, even when they are pushed to the outskirts of the city or harassed by a pervasive urban violence.

This film has recently been rediscovered and is the object of fresh interest. Renewed attention was sparked by the work of Patrizia La Trecchia, an Italian researcher transplanted in the United States, who focused on Ciruzzi's film in some meaningful pages of her recent book on Naples (La Trecchia 2013). In studying this movie, she identified the same polemic thread that can be traced in the more celebrated, and universally known, film by Francesco Rosi, *Le mani sulla città* (Hands over the city). Released in 1963, *Le mani sulla città* launched the harshest attack ever against a political class that let the city be assaulted by wild building speculation. Notably, into his film *Angeli*, Ciruzzi included voices of protest from the soundtrack of *Le mani sulla città*, and used clips of a crowded Piazza del Plebiscito from Vittorio De Sica's *Il giudizio universale* (The Universal Judgment, 1961).

Angeli must be praised for having issued a vibrant warning on the possible side effects of a specific style of public-space management. This kind of management is marked by a strong form of *dirigisme* enforced by local administrations unwilling to contemplate viable alternative, especially those favoured by artists and intellectuals who were a minority at the time the film was shot. So *Angeli* shared its fate with other works on Naples (for instance, *Il grande progetto* – the great project – a docufilm by Vincenzo Marra about the urban transformation of the former Bagnoli industrial area, at the western outskirts of Naples); it was removed from the mainstream cultural landscape, because it did not fit the imperative of contributing to build consent for the ruling local government. On the whole, the years of the 'Neapolitan Renaissance' were marked by a celebrative pragmatism, sometimes yielding good artistic results, while failing to producing significant change in the city. Above all, the élite in power failed in what they saw as their pedagogical positive/progressive task of 'educating' the weakest social groups (Pardo 2012). Not surprisingly, the end of the great installations in the Piazza del Plebiscito coincided with the great waste crisis of the mid-2000s. Once again, this piazza was an icon for the whole city. For example, one of the most astonishing demonstrations during the hardest phase of the waste crisis took place in November 2010, when trash bags were hung between the columns of the Piazza del Plebiscito hemicycle. The black bags were also stacked in front of the Prefecture (located on one side of the piazza) in order to prompt the local authorities to come to grips with a crisis that was undermining the civil life of the city. Through that counter-installation Neapolitan citizens brought the square back to the tough reality, thus dissolving the dreamy imagination created by the artistic installations of the previous fifteen years.

The last artistic installation in the Piazza del Plebiscito, set up just before Christmas 2009, was composed of three enormous lighted balloons filled with helium created by the German artist Carsten Nicolai. This work of art, titled *Pioneer*, was quickly removed from the piazza. The local government argued that the installation was dangerous as it was exposed to atmospheric agents. Apparently, one of the balloons had burned after it was hit by a rocket

lunched by unidentified thugs – something similar had happened some years earlier to an installation by the German artist Rebecca Horn, whose little bronze skulls were partly stolen.

Using a highly poetic language, *Angels* anticipated the ‘air disaster’ of Carsten Nicolai’s balloon and invited us to think about the need to find a truly balanced relationship among different parts of the city; for instance, between the centre and the periphery, between the everyday harsh reality of life among ordinary Neapolitans and the widely flaunted artistic representations that, however appealing, made no-one forget the city’s long-running problems. Interestingly, only a few isolated voices, among them Italo Pardo’s (2001; 2012: 67-8), expressed heavy scepticism about using public spaces for artistic installations that could only provide some superficial, time-limited aesthetic satisfaction; weak surrogates for the much-needed and long overdue substantial improvement in the quality of urban life, that aimed at implementing the distorted pedagogical task of a ruling élite and self-appointed judge of who was a good or a bad citizen.

References

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