Francesco Rosi's Cristo si è fermato a Eboli: *Toward a Cinema of Painting*

In the 1963 prefatory letter to Giulio Einaudi that opens *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, the painter and writer Carlo Levi posits his art as the original source of his book: "il *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* fu dapprima esperienza, e pittura e poesia, e poi teoria e gioia di verità [. . .], per diventare infine e apertamente racconto" (*Cristo* xix). The fundamental function of painting is confirmed in a private note to a friend, where he remarks that his paintings "furono in verità i soli appunti sui quali anni dopo il libro fu elaborato e costruito. Essi sono non solo illustrazioni, ma la sua interpretazione autentica" (qtd. in Wells 167). In this essay, I propose that Francesco Rosi's cinematic re-elaboration of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* further develops the idea of painting as the basis of the narration. In adapting Levi's memoir for the screen, Rosi relies explicitly on Levi's Lucanian paintings, and presents them as the fundamental semiotic unit of his own film language. He thus creates a cinema of painting, analogous to Pier Paolo Pasolini's "cinema of poetry," where the painted image dictates the stylemes of cinematic language and determines the narrative structure of the film. Paradoxically, then, in his cinematic re-elaboration of Levi's book, Rosi is most original when he is most faithful to Levi's poetics, exploring and giving full expression to the visual potential of the writer's text.

In an interview with Carlo Testa, Rosi clarifies his approach to the adaptation of Levi's book, underscoring both his reverence for the author's work and his awareness of the role of the director's inventiveness in translating words into images:

> One cannot choose a masterpiece such as Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* and then use it exclusively as a source of raw material. That simply would not be a legitimate way to proceed. Using a book as a source and as a point of reference carries with it the obligation to respect a certain narrative structure. Surely, this narrative structure will eventually, when translated into images, have to muster the specific demands made upon it by the images themselves, which are different from those imposed by words. Thus it is that the film also eventually becomes an act of writing, to the extent that the creative process involved in a film is autonomous with respect to its literary antecedent. (Testa 145–6)

In his own *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, the director effectively engages in the authorship of a new, specifically cinematic, text, whose structure is entirely dictated by the "demands" of the image as its foundational principle.

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Rosi's poetics of adaptation can be illuminated by a reading of Pasolini's cinematic theory, which Gilles Deleuze credits with a revolutionary transformation of the relationship between the cinematic image and the word (Deleuze 110). Pasolini advocates a specifically visual form of filmmaking that he calls "cinema of poetry," in opposition to the narrative-oriented classic cinema, associated with prose. At the core of his categorization is the notion that the language of cinema is based upon an *im-segno*, as opposed to the linguistic *linsegno*. Im-signs precede the development of discursive codes of expression, and are analogous to the images that constitute the texture of dreams and memories. In this way, the cinema discloses "the poetic substratum of the world," as David Ward puts it (117), and shapes an authentic language of poetry. Pasolini's cinematic language, then, is based upon a fundamentally irrational entity, which can be used by the director as a subversive tool, in order to make apparent the chaos underlying the illusory order of technological society. Because of the nature of images, which are not given as already organized in a "dictionary," the cinematic semiotic code is always subjective and lyrical. Each director must create his own idiom through style, which assumes a crucial role in the meaning-making process. The privileged technique of Pasolini's cinema is the free indirect subjective shot, which signals – as does free indirect discourse, its literary equivalent – "l'immersione dell'autore nell'animo del suo personaggio, e quindi l'adozione, da parte dell'autore, non solo della psicologia del suo personaggio, ma anche della sua lingua" (176). The director's concrete poetic instrument is the camera, which must abandon the transparency of classic film in order to "be felt," questioning with its presence the naturalness of narrative succession (184).

With its critique of narrative film, Pasolini's essay proposes a form of cinema singularly suitable to represent on screen an anti-cinematic text like Levi's memoir. The book's episodic structure, its lack of a real plot, the immobility of the characters fixed in time and space without any apparent possibility for change, and, above all, its pictorial quality, defy the dynamism that defines cinema from its etymological origins. Millicent Marcus observes how Rosi partially solves this problem by making the audience "participate in the temporal slowdown of Aliano through the very pacing of his film, which is dictated not by actions or events, but by the natural rhythms of the peasants' routine" (355). The camera's adhesion to the temporal dimension of the village creates an impression of *vera durata*, which seems to reflect Pasolini's call for a cinema that is "come nozione primordiale e archetipa, *un continuo e infinito piano-sequenza*" (Pasolini, "Battute" 229). Although for Rosi, as for Pasolini, this "infinite long take" can only be a working hypothesis, while montage is a necessity, in *Eboli* there is a recognizable tendency toward long pans that can be referred to the desire, described by

Pasolini, to recreate the fluidity of existential time. A primary example of this tendency can be found in the sequence of Levi's journey toward Aliano. The camera offers long takes of the landscape, following Levi's gaze as he observes the countryside from the windows of a series of vehicles, each traveling more slowly than the last. These pans prepare viewer and protagonist alike for the timelessness of Aliano. Another symptomatic use of long pans occurs in one of the closing scenes, in which Mussolini announces the Italian victory over Ethiopia. His booming voice is broadcast over the radio in order to reach all of Italy, but proves unable to transform the lives of the villagers, who continue their work, deaf to the triumphs of Fascist Italy. In this scene the camera again slowly follows the contours of the terrain, contrasting the empty and silent vastness of the landscape with the sounds of the crowds exalting their leader in a Roman piazza. Thus, through a "poetic" use of the camera, Rosi is able to mold a new expressive language, which allows him to represent mimetically the issues of temporality that are central to Levi's text.

Levi foregrounds the problem of time in the extra-diegetic prologue to *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*: "Cristo si è davvero fermato a Eboli [. . .]. Cristo non è mai arrivato qui, né vi è arrivato il tempo, né l'anima individuale, né la speranza, né il legame tra le cause e gli effetti, la ragione e la Storia" (*Cristo* 5). The peasants, whose existence has been grounded in the cyclical alternation of the seasons for thousands of years, belong to a different civilization, fully foreign to Levi's Western-European culture: "parliamo un diverso linguaggio: la nostra lingua è qui incomprensibile" (4). The linguistic clash that Levi experiences with the villagers of Aliano is not simply a metaphor for cultural distance. As Gramsci explains, in fact, language is never an abstract issue, but the *locus* of the intersection of culture and politics ("Grammar" 354–5). For Gramsci – whose writings shaped the ideas of an entire generation of Italian artists and writers of the political Left – "language also means culture and philosophy" and as such is always historically and socially determined ("Language" 347). Faced with unmitigated cultural and philosophical difference, Levi, like Pasolini in his Roman fiction, realizes the need to forge an original narrative code, in order to give voice to the marginalized experience of the peasants, who are situated outside the *logos* – strangers to Christ, to the Word made Flesh. In his novels of the 1950s, Pasolini adopts the technique of free indirect discourse to appropriate the language of the *borgatari* that inhabit his stories. In this way, he rejects the notion of standard Italian as a bourgeois fabrication that promotes through its very existence the instances of this class. In contrast Levi, who remains faithful to his painterly vocation, chooses to fashion a parallel strategy that challenges the supremacy of the word itself. By allowing the pictorial and imagistic aspects of his prose to assume an essential role within the verbal narra-

tion, Levi rejects logocentrism in favor of the mythical imagination of the Lucanian *contadino*. The dialogue between the verbal and the visual semiotic systems that Levi introduces in the text, by founding his narrative representation upon the image, constitutes the metonymic expression of his resistance to established authority, and attributes a loaded political significance to his book.

Levi's privileging of the pictorial over the verbal in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* constitutes a variant of Pasolini's free indirect discourse, and parallels the ideal delineated by his cinematic semiotics, with its emphasis on the subversive power of the language of images as opposed to the language of words. For this reason, Pasolini's theory proves, once again, to be a productive grid with which to interpret Rosi's adaptation. Indeed, Rosi seems to embrace the notion of the *im-sign* as the basis of an authentically cinematic language, and to adapt it to Levi's visual poetics, by making painting the semiotic unit of a new expressive code. The framing sequences of *Eboli* are critical to this enterprise. They represent an authentic prologue in which Rosi introduces the crucial thematic and aesthetic issues of the film and establishes an explicit analogy between Levi's painting and his own filmmaking. *Eboli* opens with a scene set in Levi's art studio, where the painter, now old, contemplates the pictures he conceived in Aliano. Before the credits appear on screen, the audience encounters Levi's gaze through a close-up of his face as he looks directly into the camera. As soon as his eyes seem to concentrate on an object outside the viewer's field of vision, the camera – in a break with classic rules of unobtrusiveness – presents a reverse shot of the back of his head, which signals its appropriation of Levi's subjective perspective. The focalizer, then, becomes Levi himself as the camera moves around the artist's studio and focuses on the Lucanian paintings that crowd the room.

As the painter's eyes rest upon the canvases that surround him, he recites in voice-over the words of the book's prologue, which presents the narration to follow as a journey through the author's memories of his exilic experience. In Levi's text, though, it is a similar situation of forced confinement – the need to hide in Nazi-occupied Florence in 1944 – that elicits the writer's reminiscences, whereas Rosi's prologue attributes the activation of Levi's memory directly to his paintings. Through this choice, as Marcus points out, a medium-specific parallel is established between the character's exploration of his own recollections and Rosi's cinematic re-elaboration (342). The portraits of the peasants, whose lives Levi shared for an entire year in Aliano, prompt in him the emergence of what Lawrence Langer calls "deep memory." Langer develops the notions of deep and common memory in relation to testimonies of survivors of the Shoah. Common memory allows for the inclusion of a past experience – in the cases he examines, a highly traumatic one – within a narrative framework that entails closure,

permitting a certain degree of detachment toward these events. In contrast, deep memory threatens to collapse the distinction between the old and the current self, by rendering the past present again. While common memory is governed by the rational mind, deep memory is unconscious and typically surfaces in dreams, where the will is unable to resist its irruption. Because of its link with the subconscious, it gives way to an evocation, rather than a rationalized account, of the past (Langer 4–9). Deep memory, then, appears closely related to Pasolini's notion of the cinema of poetry, whose unique image-based language also belongs to the oneiric and mnemonic dimension. Rosi's use of Levi's paintings seems to authorize the analogy between deep memory and Pasolini's theory. Triggered by the visual impact of his paintings, Levi's involuntary memories are the direct source of Rosi's narration. Generating a visual re-evocation of Levi's past experiences, both the paintings and Rosi's film make present again the period of his exile. In the film, then, the paintings play the same role that the poems, notes, and letters that he had written during his confinement in Lucania played in the composition of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*. Just as Levi drew on his verbal records from Aliano as the basis of his book, so Rosi uses Levi's paintings as the foundation of his film. In this sense, Rosi's use of painting in this first sequence self-consciously directs the spectator's attention to his strategy of transposition from a verbal semiotic system, constructed on the word, to a specifically cinematic one, where the image is the fundamental element.

Rosi is quite explicit in proposing the painted image as the primary unit of his filmic text. At the beginning of the framing sequence, before the voice-over begins, Levi's eyes span the walls of his spacious studio, and stop to focus on one portrait of Giulia Venere's son, Carmelino, *La porta del sud* (fig. 1). Here, the young child is wearing bright pink clothes which contrast dramatically with the earth-tones of Aliano's countryside in the background. His figure is situated in the foreground, at the margins of the painting, marking the threshold between the world of artistic representation and the space surrounding it. At the same time, his head is turned toward the exterior, his gaze looking directly at the viewer and summoning her into his world.[1] As its title suggests, the portrait represents the spectator's visual point of entrance into the territory of the peasants' experience, standing metonymically for all the paintings that populate Levi's study.[2]

In this scene, Rosi extends the significance of his appropriation of Levi's painting from the aesthetic to the ethical level, mirroring Levi's belief in the moral and political impact of art. After lingering on Carmelino's face, the camera rests upon the other portraits hanging from the studio's white walls: the *contadini*, wearing suits of the same color as the terrain they have been toiling every day of their lives; Giulia, the witch-servant holding in her arms the youngest of her six-

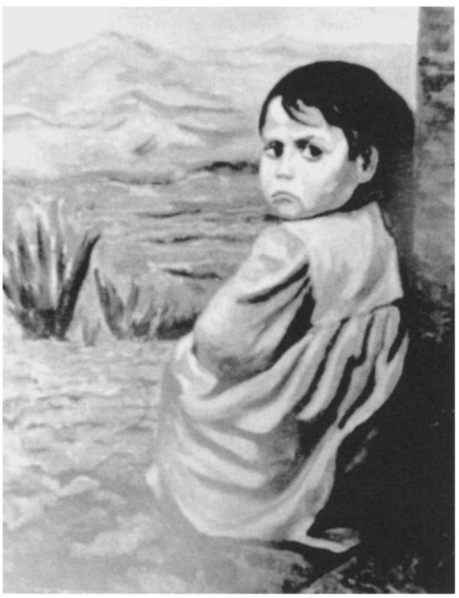

Fig. 1. Carlo Levi, *La porta del Sud*, 1935. Private Collection, Rome. (Rosi, cover image).

teen illegitimate children; Giovannino, with his little friend, the goat; other young shepherds with their animals. All the characters that inhabit Levi's book and whom the spectator will encounter in the film are introduced in this first sequence. Like the painting representing Carmelino, their images fill the screen without sharp distinctions between the artistic space in which they dwell and the reality of the screen, which envelops the audience in the darkness of the movie theater. The frames of the paintings are absorbed by the cinematic frame, and the space they circumscribe is no longer an inward-oriented, "contemplative area opening solely onto the interior of the painting," as André Bazin puts it (222). Instead, the pictorial space comes to include the spectators, who cannot avoid the characters' direct stares, and must actively engage in a dialogue with them. The film cannot simply be relegated to the category of escapist entertainment, but rather, consistent with Rosi's civic concerns throughout his career, the viewer must allow the story to have an impact upon her life, to provoke her and, eventually, enable her to enact positive change.

Like Rosi, Levi is deeply convinced of the necessity for art to engender a dynamic tension toward political action. In his writings, he is utterly critical of those Italian cultural currents whose purely aesthetic interests seem to detach their work from history and society. In this respect, he shares Gramsci's notion of art as inevitably rooted in

historical reality. Like Gramsci, Levi believes that art cannot be an instrument of evasion from reality, but must rather be viewed as a rich epistemological instrument, which allows for a deeper awareness of the world. By presenting Levi's portraits as the privileged point of entrance into the Lucanian world of the film, then, Rosi validates the Gramscian notion of art's cognitive function, which is further reinforced by the camera's emphasis on the eyes of the characters depicted. Drawing from the traditional hierarchy of the senses, in which sight is associated with the higher rational faculties, Rosi dictates how the audience must approach the narration through the example of the characters' gazes. In particular, Carmelino's solemn yet innocent eyes seem to suggest that a full comprehension of the distant reality projected on screen can only be achieved by assuming the same candid look, a look full of wonderment, respect, and sympathy for the civilization of Aliano's peasants.

This openness to the complete otherness of the South is not only the prerequisite for understanding the film, but it has an additional existential value, which stems from Levi's reflections on the portrait as a painterly genre. For Levi, the other, which encompasses, as a concept, "storia, ragione, tempo, vicenda, religione, vita, racconto, fantasia, dimensione, prospettiva, rapporto, [. . .] tutto quello che è determinato, particolare, individuato, frammento di esistenza, aspetto istantaneo di una entità temporale" (Levi, "Ritratti" 11) acquires substance and reality only in the form of the portrait. The portrait, in fact, realizes the absolute unity of self and other in as much as it is "frutto di un rapporto e di una presenza: della collaborazione necessaria e preziosa della persona ritratta, che, momento di una relazione creatrice, dà quello che è anche senza saperlo" (14). For Levi, the portrait determines his relationship with the whole of reality: "nulla è [. . .] escluso dal ritratto, neanche le forme cosiddetti astratte o pure, o non corrispondenti a oggetto alcuno, purché con esse intervenga o possa intervenire quella relazione vitale. Perciò tutta la pittura è ritratto" (20-1). Within this creative relationship with the world, the artist becomes aware of who he is by uncovering in the other the archetypal form of his own self: "se la prima immagine è quella di sé come altro, il ritratto è l'immagine dell'altro come se stesso" (9). Thus, exile represented for Levi a concrete occasion for self-discovery in the encounter with the subaltern classes of the Italian South. As he writes to Giulio Einaudi, Levi found himself "nell'altrove, nell'altro da sé, [. . .] fuori dello specchio dell'acque di Narciso, negli uomini, sulla terra arida" (*Cristo* xvii): the involvement with the characters of Rosi's film might prove an equally revealing experience for the contemporary public.

Yet, the journey toward knowledge and understanding is not an easy one. Carmelino's position at the border between the viewer's reality and the represented world remains symbolic of the unbridgeable

gap between the culture of the viewer and that of the peasants. As Marcia Landy observes in reference to the Taviani brothers, "the audience is asked to contemplate another culture [. . .]; but unlike in conventional ethnography, the existence of difference is not a subject of fascination. Differences in appearance, language, behavior, and values are everywhere evident and are not mitigated" (179). Rosi, too, emphasizes this difference, effectively rejecting "a melodramatic treatment of the subaltern as unproblematically knowable and knowing, dependent and victimized" (Landy 183). As the critic Roger Angell observes, in fact, the peasants ultimately "remain difficult and strange to us, distanced by their endless work and their black-clothed silence and endurance, and the movie does not sentimentalize them by pushing beyond its tentative intellectual perception of such lives" (Angell 80).

The restraint that Rosi maintains in his representation of the villagers' existence is further reflected in the relationship he establishes with Levi's character, through his particular use of the camera. Throughout the film, the camera's position oscillates between subjectivity and objectivity, generating that particular status of the cinematic image that Jean Mitry defines as "semisubjective." For Mitry, in the semisubjective image the camera adopts the viewpoint of a particular character, who nonetheless is described objectively according to the demands of the descriptive image, while "the camera follows him wherever he goes, acts like him, sees with him and at the same time" (Mitry 218). This "being-with" of the camera is also the essence of Pasolini's cinematic free indirect discourse. As Deleuze explains, through the technique of the "free indirect subjective" Pasolini enacts a dialogue between the camera as "independent aesthetic consciousness" and the character's point of view. In other words, the camera does not simply display the character's world and his vision, but imposes upon it another perspective within which the character's vision transforms itself and reflects itself (Deleuze 108, my trans.). In *Eboli*, Rosi creates the same doubling of the subject of perception by juxtaposing the objectivity of an external point of view with the character's subjectivity. Whereas Levi is the focalizer in the prologue scene, as the camera follows him in his journey of discovery of the South, the perspective constantly shifts between Levi's vision and Rosi's perception of Levi's subjective viewpoint. In this way, Rosi maintains his respectful acceptance of Levi's unique perspective on his exile, without renouncing his own aesthetic and ethical concerns.

The sequences representing Levi's first explorations of Aliano are particularly apt to illustrate this aspect of Rosi's cinematic technique. In these scenes, as Deleuze would put it, the director's camera "does not become confused with the character, and does not remain outside him, but it exists *with him*" (106, my trans.). As Levi walks along the narrow streets, witnessing for the first time life in this village, the

camera focuses upon his figure, often zooming onto his features, which express disbelief and curiosity, sympathy and reticence, outrage and compassion. The camera assumes a position of detached objectivity, turning him into an object of the viewer's gaze. At the same time, though, Levi as protagonist is "un occhio indagatore che osserva, un orecchio che ascolta" (Rosi, qtd. in Tassone 304). As he observes the landscape, the peasants, the animals, the houses of Aliano, and gathers the visual memories that will continue to inspire him after his departure from Aliano and influence the written account of his confinement, his gaze dictates what the camera sees. Rosi's camera adopts Levi's painterly perspective upon reality, and often replicates Levi's pictures of exile in the construction of individual frames. Thus, not only does painting represent a fundamental thematic thread in the film, but it also conditions Rosi's stylistic choices. Painting becomes the main styleme of *Eboli*'s cinematography, the foundation of the aesthetic program of a cinema of painting proposed by Rosi in the prologue scene.

In the sequence of Levi's arrival in Lucania, while he journeys toward Aliano, the slow camera movement turns the viewer into a companion. As Levi observes the bare landscape of mountainous countryside surrounding the steep, winding roads he travels, Rosi's point-of-view shots enable the spectator to share his perspective. He has left behind the train that took him to Eboli, symbolic of a technological society dominated by the values of progress and modernity, and has boarded a small bus, from which he looks at the valleys sloping toward the Ionic sea. As he writes in his memoir, from the top of one of the hills he could take in the entire land, "come un mare di terra biancastra, monotona e senz'alberi: bianchi e lontani i paesi, ciascuno in vetta al suo colle, Irsina, Craco, Montalbano, Salandra, Pisticci, Grottole, Ferrandina, le terre e le grotte dei briganti, fin laggiù dove c'è forse il mare, e Metaponto e Taranto" (*Cristo* 5). Among the villages dotting the landscape, Grassano, the first town of his confinement, appears to him "bianco, in cima ad un alto colle desolato, come un piccola Gerusalemme immaginaria nella solitudine di un deserto" (5). The daring analogy between Grassano and Jerusalem is reproposed in the title of one of his paintings from 1935, *Grassano come Gerusalemme*, of which only photographic copies are available. Levi's visual culture permeates this characterization, where the comparison between the two cities constitutes a reference to the tradition of illustrations to Dante's *Commedia*. In Rosi's film, the view of the distant villages, framed as in a painting by the bus windows, seems to duplicate exactly Levi's *Grassano come Gerusalemme*. Even the trees growing on the sides of the road, ghastly and oppressive with their barren branches, are reminders of the infernal mood of Levi's descent into the South, evoking both Dante's dark wood and his forest of the suicides. Thus, in repro-

ducing Levi's first passage through the desolate land of his confinement, Rosi assumes the writer's pictorial standpoint, appropriating and expanding visually its Dantean subtext.

Levi's painting influences Rosi's cinematography not only in the representation of the landscape, but also in the attraction the director's camera seems to feel for the human face. Antonello Trombadori observes how for Rosi, "il punto di riferimento con la pittura contemporanea è nel solo artista italiano che abbia fatto del 'ritratto' un problema di rassomiglianza al tempo stesso somatica e introspettiva [. . .]: Carlo Levi" (Trombadori 77). Like Levi, Rosi favors children as subjects. Although the director normally avoids close-ups, as he is interested in investigating the connection between individual and environment, rather than personal psychology, in *Eboli* the children often fill the screen with their penetrating gazes, reproducing almost exactly Levi's portraits of them. In the episode in which the little peasants watch an exasperated Levi confront the *brigadiere* who follows him everywhere, for example, Rosi represents them in ways that directly evoke Levi's paintings. The first frame, where a young shepherd stands by a younger sibling and a small goat under a tree, is a clear reference to *Giovannino e Nennella*, in which the painter explores the affectionate link between the boy and the animal, by isolating their figures against a neutral background that makes them appear as a plastic unity (fig. 2). The three young boys crouching under a tree in the grass evoke, with their position in space and their dark clothing, Levi's *Tre ragazzi (Aliano)* (fig. 3). Portraits of children are also proposed in the sequence in which Levi teaches them to paint, where the camera lingers especially on their eyes. And, of course, Giulia Venere's presence imposes itself on screen as it does in the numerous images preserved by Levi in his pictures (fig. 4).

Rosi thus realizes the ideal delineated by Visconti in "Cinema antropomorfico," where his *maestro* explains how his fascination with the cinema was provoked by a desire "to tell the stories of living men, of living men *among* things, not of things *per se*" (Visconti 84). Visconti calls this kind of cinema "anthropomorphic," because at its core lies the human figure: "the heft of a human being, his presence, is the only thing which really fills the frame; [. . .] *he* creates the atmosphere with his living presence. [. . .] The most humble gesture of a man, his face, his hesitations and his impulses, impart poetry and life to the things which surround him and to the setting in which they take place" (83-4). Gianni Rondolino confirms that "è proprio il 'volto,' tanto dei personaggi quanto del paesaggio, a indicare il discorso estetico-ideologico del *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* di Rosi" (Rondolino 16). For Rondolino, *volto* means presence, "una realtà che vive e parla sullo schermo per se stessa, [. . .] uomini e donne che si muovono nella loro

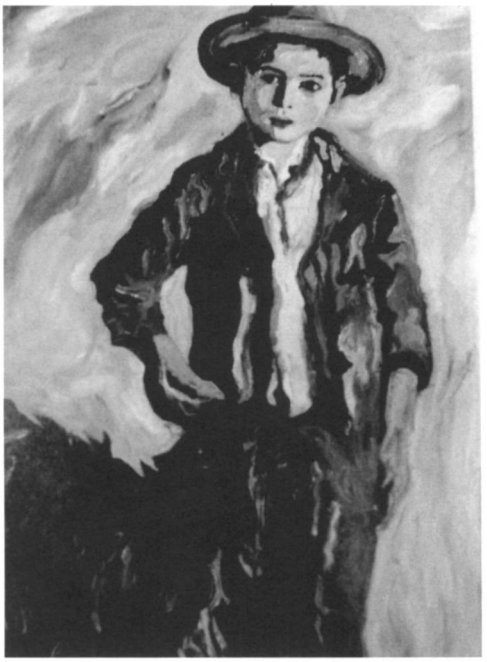

Fig. 2. Carlo Levi, *Giovannino e Nennella*, 16 February 1936, Fondazione Carlo Levi, Rome. © SIAE – ARS

Fig. 3. Carlo Levi, *Tre ragazzi (Aliano)*, 30 January 1936, Fondazione Carlo Levi, Rome. © SIAE – ARS

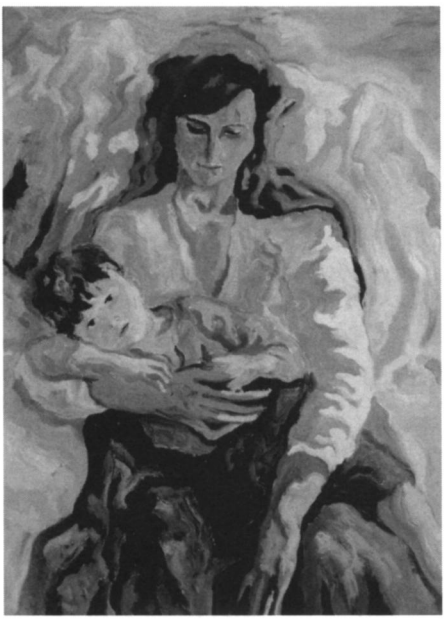

Fig. 4. Carlo Levi, *La Santarcangelese*, 5 January 1936, Fondazione Carlo Levi, Rome. © SIAE – ARS

dimensione reale, con i loro volti, le loro parole, i loro gesti, i loro sguardi" (16). By appropriating Levi's artistic passion for the human form, and by adapting it to the different expressive exigencies of the cinema, Rosi successfully allows the reality of the South to impose itself beyond constricting ideological or historical interpretations. By existing on screen, in other words, Aliano's peasants are made present in the spectators' lives, moving the viewers to reflection and active involvement. The camera, in fact, is never just an "aesthetic consciousness" – to return to Deleuze's formulation – but its use is deeply rooted in Rosi's ethical preoccupation with the political and social aspects of his work. Through the use of the semisubjective image Rosi establishes, according to Jean Gili, a "sistema di doppio commento" in which the director "sviluppa simultaneamente la funzione tradizionale della denuncia di fronte a una determinata situazione e si interroga costantemente sul ruolo dell'intellettuale, dell'artista, di fronte a una certa realtà di cui vorrebbe provocare il cambiamento" (24).

The question of the role of the intellectual in the struggle for social and political progress is crucial for Rosi, in the wake of Gramsci's preoccupation with education as the means for subaltern groups to achieve the self-awareness necessary to obtain positive change. Through Levi's persona, Rosi dramatizes his own search for an

authentic intellectual position vis-à-vis peasant culture. In this sense, Rosi's view of painting as a cognitive process allows him to explore visually the issues of power, gender, and knowledge that are strictly connected to it. Exemplary in this regard is the dialogue on the nature of portraits – condensing several pages of Levi's book – which takes place between the painter and his housekeeper, Giulia Venere. Having had multiple pregnancies after her husband's emigration to America, Giulia has already lost her honor and is thus the only woman who can work for the bachelor Levi. In the film, she is interpreted as a mysterious, sensual creature by the Greek actress Irene Papas, whose foreign accent draws further attention to her status as an outcast within Aliano's social order. Her position of marginality within an already marginal society makes her a poignant symbol of the subaltern individual as such, and her relationship with Levi offers an important reflection on the rapport between intellectuals and *popolo*.

In this sequence of the film, Giulia comes into Levi's room while he is taking a bath and reproaches him for not having called her to help, according to the local custom. Taken aback, Levi nonetheless lets her bathe him, while she comments quite explicitly on his physical attributes. Trying to evade the embarrassing topic, Levi directs the conversation toward his painting, and interrogates Giulia on her willingness to pose for a portrait. The atmosphere becomes heavy and awkward as Giulia refuses. For Giulia, a sitter inevitably becomes the prisoner of the painter who captures her image, and thus her soul, on canvas. She will not, therefore, model for Levi. Her response enrages Levi, who accuses her of believing in "scemenze." When Giulia threatens to leave, rather than submitting to Levi's insistent requests, his reaction exposes the undercurrents of eroticism and socio-cultural tensions that flow beneath the surface of their relationship. To Giulia's warning, "Allora io me ne vado," Levi replies forcefully: "No, tu stai qui e fai quello che voglio io!" When she still resists, he slaps her violently in the face before the terrified eyes of Carmelino, who bursts into tears. Rosi thus makes visually explicit a gesture that Levi merely suggests in the book: "La minacciai dunque di batterla, e ne feci l'atto, e forse anche qualcosa di più dell'atto" (137). Despite Levi's reluctance to shed the ambiguity of his account, his literary description of the incident discloses the problematic side of his attitude toward Giulia and her culture: "Appena vide e sentì le mie mani alzate, il viso della Giulia si coprì di uno sfavillío di beatitudine e si aperse ad un sorriso felice a mostrare i suoi denti di lupo. Come prevedevo, nulla era più desiderabile per lei che di essere dominata da una forza assoluta. Divenuta a un tratto docile come un agnello, la Giulia posò con pazienza, e di fronte agli argomenti indiscutibili della potenza, dimenticò i ben giustificati e naturali timori" (137). Levi's use of animal imagery in describing Giulia dehumanizes her and places him in a position of superiority.

Through an act of violence, asserting his power over her, he is able to transform her from a threatening wolf into a tame lamb, willing to be sacrificed on the altar of the painter's art. In this context, painting is revealed as the metaphoric site of complex power relations, inextricably linked with issues of eros and gender.

In Rosi's rendition of this scene, it is the tone of the actors' voices and the intensity of their gazes that make the sexual subtext of the dialogue visually and aurally perceptible, creating in the spectator, by means of genre, the generic expectations of a seduction scene. In his memoir, Levi explicitly deals with the question of sexuality in relation to Giulia. He writes that Giulia "si stupiva che io non le chiedessi di fare all'amore" (136). Within the peasants' *Weltanschauung*, erotic desire is perceived as an irresistible natural drive, to which nobody can oppose resistance: "Se un uomo e una donna si trovano insieme al riparo e senza testimoni, nulla può impedire che essi si abbraccino, né propositi contrari, né castità, né alcun'altra difficoltà può vietarlo" (87). Sexuality belongs exclusively to the instinctual sphere, and in their resignation to its fatal power, the women of Aliano are "come animali selvatici" (89). This acceptance of sexual desire as natural and unavoidable places women outside the codes of bourgeois morality and in a position of supremacy that they would not enjoy in "civilized" society: "l'autorità delle madri è sovrana," writes Levi, "il regime è matriarcale" (89). Giulia's sexual bluntness is an expression of this alternative matriarchal order which threatens Levi's masculinity by questioning his authority. In fact, although she was "disposta per me a qualunque servigio [. . .], tuttavia, quando le chiedevo di posare, che le avrei fatto il ritratto, si rifiutava come di cosa impossibile" (136). Within this perspective the portrait acquires the quality of a displaced sexual act, in which the male painter exercises his absolute rule over the female sitter, thus restoring the normality of gender relationships in the social order. Giulia's refusal to be depicted represents an attempt to assert her own freedom, a tentative form of resistance – albeit destined to fail – to Levi's efforts to impose on her his male supremacy.

Even Giulia's motivation for her denial is perceived as threatening by Levi, who sees the categories of Western rationalistic thought constantly challenged by her belief in the mysteries of magic. Rosi dramatizes the cultural clash between Levi and his housekeeper by making him react contemptuously to her explanation of the dangerous powers of painting: "Chi ti ha insegnato queste scemenze?" he demands. Levi's trivializing view of Giulia's superstitions allows Rosi to foreground the Gramscian preoccupation with the distance between Italian intellectuals and the people, between high culture and folklore. Gramsci places folklore in opposition both to hegemonic systems of belief and to the philosophical positions of the educated strata of society: "Folklore should [. . .] be studied as 'a conception of the world and

life' implicit to a large extent in determinate [. . .] strata of society and in opposition [. . .] to 'official' conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process" ("Folklore" 189). According to Gramsci, however, the subversive potential of this alternative conception of the world is weakened by the lack of analytical consciousness, typical of the destitute: "This conception of the world," he writes, "is not elaborated and systematic because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development" (189). When considering folklore, then, the intellectual is faced with two options: either eradicate it in order to replace it with a philosophy deemed superior, or regard it as something meaningful and worthy of serious study. In the latter case, the role of the intellectual is to help the people achieve the critical awareness they need in order to effectively challenge the dominant conceptions of the world that oppress them. In no other way, Gramsci concludes, will "the separation between modern culture and popular culture of folklore [. . .] disappear" (191). In his relationship with Aliano's marginal civilization, Levi experiences fully the drama of this radical alternative and is torn between his immediate rationalistic skepticism toward magical thinking and his sympathetic stance in the face of the peasants' situation of poverty and exclusion.

In *Eboli*, Rosi offers no solutions or judgments but provokes the viewer to reflect, by making explicit the ambivalence of Levi's attitude. The bath scene, in this context, constitutes a moment of crisis, in the etymological sense of the word. If, in slapping Giulia, Levi symbolically rejects peasant tradition and adopts an "orientalist" attitude, forcefully asserting the supremacy of his own cultural baggage and gender role, he also paradoxically unlocks the gates to Giulia's universe. Significantly, real communication between Levi and Giulia becomes possible through painting, as the scene that follows Levi's brutal behavior shows. In this way, Rosi underlines once more the value of painting as a metaphor for both his own and Levi's approach to the world of rural Lucania, and he emphasizes its possibilities as an instrument of learning and understanding.

In this sequence – unfortunately edited out of the theater version of the film – Giulia and Levi are on the terrace of his house, which dominates the hilly landscape of Aliano's countryside. Dressed in the costume of her village and with Carmelino in her arms, Giulia stands in front of the painter who is standing behind his easel with a paintbrush in his hand. As Levi paints Giulia's portrait, they speak face to face, situated in space in a position of complete equality, as dictated by the

technical demands of the portrait. The requirements of portraiture impose a certain distance between them, but ironically it is this gap that allows Levi to gain access to Giulia's logic of magic and wonder. An instrument of mediation between the two worlds they represent, the canvas does not divide but rather unites them. The distance is never eliminated, nor is the otherness of peasant culture violated. On the contrary, as Millicent Marcus has observed, in this scene Rosi suggests that a certain representational detachment is necessary in order to avoid the objectification of the peasant world (343-4). For Levi's character, too, Giulia's portrait will mark the moment in which he acknowledges the difference that defines peasant culture and no longer tries to censure it.

Thanks to this acceptance, the artist is brought into the folkloric dimension that rules the peasants' lives and begins to understand it. While Levi is painting her, in fact, Giulia gives him advice on the enchantments and potions he should use to cure one of his patients. As he listens to her voice, Levi's skepticism of the woman's words slowly gives way to a more serious consideration. Finally, he asks her to teach him a charm used to bring close a beloved person who is far away. The scene concludes as he softly repeats, in the dialect of Aliano, the ancient rhymes, contemplating in solitude the starry sky and the moon. In this sequence, Rosi successfully avoids offering a facile resolution to the tension – which underlies the whole of Levi's book – between his feelings of superiority toward peasant folklore and his profound compassion for the dire predicaments of the South. Indeed, here art's connotation as a vehicle of power and authority is entertained together with its opposite value as privileged entryway into Lucania's rural civilization. Nothing can erase the fact that Giulia's portrait is only made possible through an action of forceful domination, but at the same time it is through painting that Levi learns how to speak and understand the language of Aliano's peasants.

Levi's understanding of his painting as a heuristic tool is radically opposed to that of another artist living in Aliano, don Trajella. The parish priest, whose reassignment to Aliano was meant as a disciplinary action for his sexual misconduct, in certain respects functions as Levi's *alter ego* in the film. Like the Turinese activist, don Trajella is a foreigner in Aliano, and an exile. He shares Levi's love for books, and he is also a painter. Nonetheless, his notion of culture is completely different from Levi's. Trajella sees an unbreacheable chasm between his former intellectual labors and the present of his life in Aliano. Faced with the peasants' incomprehension and their indifference to the systems of knowledge he is accustomed to, the clergyman condemns them as *profanus vulgus*. His Latin further emphasizes the distance between him and his flock, who can hardly speak the national language and are mostly illiterate. He thus becomes a symbol of the basic

extraneity of the educated classes, whether linked to the state or the Church, from the people they are called to instruct. Trajella's historiographic oeuvre, a biography of the obscure Spanish saint Calogero, will not change the peasants' lives, nor will they be touched by his polyptichs representing salient episodes of the holy man's life. On the other hand, the split between the priest and the people causes the weakening of his own intellectual energy, deprived of its purpose: his books lie abandoned in a corner of his decaying house, among roosting chickens, while his paintings remain stashed under his bed. Through the tragi-comic figure of Trajella, whose role is expanded in the film, Rosi deprecates the elitist idea of culture normally proposed by Church and state, predicated upon the contemptuous condemnation of other forms of cultural expression and destined to remain profoundly extraneous to people's lives.

Unlike Trajella, in the film Levi progressively comes to recognize the essential role culture and art can play in fashioning the self-awareness of the powerless classes. This realization reflects a shift actually taking place in his art after his exile. Compared to the still tentative and derivative experiments of the early 1930s, his painting acquires a more personal character. His *pittura del confino* moves beyond the stylization of earlier works to delineate a *realismo contadino* that adheres to the material conditions of rural life in the South without having "nulla di veristico o di fotografico," because it "crea la realtà per la prima volta nell'atto dell'espressione" ("Contadino" 31); it is not separate from peasant life, but rather participates in its tragic quality. At the same time, though, his *realismo contadino* "non ha nulla di veristico o di fotografico" ("Contadino" 31). In his landscape painting, the novel configuration of the terrain, as well as its unusual chromaticism, assert themselves and impose new coloristic choices. The color is fragmented and uneven, contributing to the dynamism of the compositions. His broad brushstrokes allude to – more than represent – the physical concreteness of reality, without enclosing it within clearly defined dimensional plans (see Vivarelli 26). And the presence of the Expressionist influence in some of his portraits is clearly recognizable in the grotesque deformation of the human figure, and in the shocking repugnance of certain animal subjects. Even on a theoretical level, Levi's Lucanian realism is not concerned with mimetic fidelity, because it "crea la realtà per la prima volta nell'atto dell'espressione" ("Contadino" 31).

In speaking of the power of art to create reality, Levi brings to light its capacity to generate a new awareness of the existence of material reality and of his own self, through the act of representation. The object depicted (whether in words or images) acquires reality because its presence is recognized consciously for the first time. As he recounts in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, when looking at a canvas, at the end of a day's work, the peasants would be "meravigliati di vedere Grassano, nato

così dal nulla" (134). He remembers "la commossa meraviglia dei contadini quando venivano, la sera, nella mia casa, a vedere i quadri di paesaggi e di figure che io avevo dipinto (e che non erano certamente dei quadri veristi o fotografici), nel riconoscere in essi quella collina, quel bosco, quegli animali, quel viso ad essi ben noto, come se per la prima volta lo vedessero o ne prendessero coscienza" ("Contadino" 31). Levi anticipates here Antoine Compagnon's reconsideration of *mimesis* as an effective instrument of *reconnaissance*: "a cognitive activity taking form from the experience of time, configuration, synthesis, dynamic *praxis*, which, instead of imitating, produces what it represents, augments common meaning, and issues in recognition" (96). In fulfilling this heuristic function, Levi's Lucanian painting also proves to be a powerful political tool, as it allows the subaltern society it represents to gain awareness of its own being and situation, according to the Gramscian paradigm.

In the film, the educational possibilities of art are explored particularly in relation to the children of the village, who are Levi's favorite companions and pupils. They admire Levi's painting, never ceasing to be surprised to recognize, in his pictures, familiar landscapes and faces. In his memoir, Levi describes them as "rapidi nell'intuire, pieni di desiderio di apprendere e di ammirazione per le cose ignote del mondo di fuori" (*Cristo* 190). He recounts how they ask him to teach them to write, knowing that they will learn in the local schools from teachers interested more in patriotic speeches than in education. In adapting the episode for the screen, Rosi transforms writing into painting, reinforcing the visual nature of his own transposition of Levi's text and underlining once more the essential function of painting as an instrument of knowledge and understanding in the world of the film. The choice of painting over writing further develops the opposition between a logocentric cultural perspective and an alternative approach to interpreting reality. Levi's art lesson to the children – who, like women, are powerless within Aliano's dispossessed society – becomes a highly charged political symbol. For the marginal culture of Southern peasantry, learning how to paint introduces the possibility of gaining consciousness of their own existence and of finding their own voice, through a discursive practice that does not conform to established power structures.

The scene opens with a medium shot of a little girl looking wide-eyed at Levi and listening as he speaks. The camera then slowly pans the room, revealing a small crowd of children sitting on the floor with paper and paint and surrounding Levi, crouched in their midst while directing their work. The camera seems to adopt Levi's stance in relation to the children, who are shot from an eye-level angle throughout the sequence. Rosi thus places viewers in a position of complete equality with Levi's young friends, suggesting that we, too, might learn

from the painter's words. The artist's lesson, indeed, carries important meta-cinematic implications, with its emphasis on the act of looking. He invites the children to keep their eyes open in order to take in all of reality through their sense of sight: "Allora, tutte queste cose bisogna guardarle bene. E bisogna guardare un rametto secco ... Bisogna guardare un pezzo di pane ... Bisogna guardare un granello di sabbia ... E bisogna persino guardare l'aria. Cosa fa l'aria? ... Allora, cosa fa l'aria? Fa tremolare le stelle." Looking makes familiar things become different: "Come sono le nuvole? Grasse o magre? Sono tutte grasse le nuvole?" In this sense, the capacity to look is the pre-condition of the process by which painting reveals the world anew. It is the basis of visual representation as the expression of one's understanding of reality. Through looking, the children gain a new awareness of the world, which empowers them to represent it, that is to interpret it and make sense of it in their own terms.

The experience of discovery made by the children of Aliano in learning about art is shared by Rosi himself who, in his interview with Aldo Tassone, explains how he found in all forms of artistic expression, from music to architecture to painting, the possibility of systematizing his emotional experiences (Tassone 279–80). Rosi's art historical culture is evident in the film, which presents Levi's art not in isolation but rather in dialogue with the European tradition. In this sense, Rosi reclaims another attribute of Visconti's cinema – its unique faithfulness both to the Neorealist code of immediacy and to the director's rich culture, which allows him to transcend the immediate present of the narration and to represent "la dimensione del reale a valore di simbolo" (Rosi, qtd. in Tassone 283).[3] Rosi's *Eboli* thus successfully explores all the possibilities offered by painting as the semiotic unit of a cinematic work. In *Eboli*, painting constitutes an effective instrument of meta-artistic reflection on the specificity of cinematic language. Thematically, it allows the director to investigate the intricacy of gender relations, the complexities of power, the problem of the intellectual's role within a marginal society. Finally, art represents a source of visual inspiration, the main styleme of a new "cinema of painting." which fulfills Levi's search for a form of expression where the distance between word and image could finally be conquered.

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NOTES

[1] Millicent Marcus links Rosi's use of this painting to the Renaissance tradition of the *Sprecher*, "who beckons the viewer into the world of the painting while defining the boundary between the artwork and the extraaesthetic space of the observer" (343).

[2] The importance of this image is further underlined in the televised version of the film, where it serves as background for each episode's opening credits. Indeed, *Eboli* was first created as a television miniseries in four episodes of one hour each. In this version, the film opens and closes in Levi's studio, where at the end the artist is shown falling asleep – or resting in death – after concluding his narration. The version of the film released in the theaters was reduced to 145 minutes, and closed with Levi's departure from Lucania. The American version was further cut to 120 minutes.

[3] Although Rosi gives no explicit indication of his pictorial sources, besides Levi's paintings, art historical memories are recognizable throughout the film, where the director draws, for instance, from the Macchiaioli, Neapolitan genre painting, and the Romantic realism of Millet. These sources also contribute to Rosi's "cinema of painting."

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