

SILVANA SILVESTRI

## A SKEIN OF REVERSALS

### *The films of Gianni Amelio*

**A**S CHISELLED AS A PORTRAIT by Antonello da Messina, the cinema of Gianni Amelio has consistently confronted the Italian public with an image of its society that disturbs or shocks it. In a country where, for the past twenty years, most films have offered little more than enlarged screens for the formats and topics of TV programmes designed as vehicles for advertising revenues, Amelio has explored a series of repressed or prohibited themes—child prostitution, filial delation, Albanian immigration, fate of Southerners in the North—in ways that have always disconcerted expectations. Known abroad mainly, if not exclusively, for *Il ladro di bambini* (Thief of Children, 1992), his output has been spare: some ten films over a period of three decades. But each work has counted. Furious disputes over his last, *Così ridevano* (The Way We Laughed, 1998), are still smouldering.

Sometimes regarded as the only living descendant of neo-realism, in recent years Amelio himself has been at pains to discount the term. What, he often asks, did such radically dissimilar directors as De Sica, Rossellini and Visconti ever have in common? If there was a period when he invoked Rossellini as a model, he now treats ‘perhaps the most intelligent director of all time’ as an unattainable ideal, everything of which he himself is incapable.<sup>1</sup> Stylistically, in fact, he owes most to Antonioni, from whom he learnt a certain visual language—above all, movement within the frame—and narrative technique: for example, the distinctive use of narrative tangent and ellipse. If it took some

time for critics to realize this, it was because his subjects were so different. Where the occasion of Antonioni's cinema is nearly always relations between the sexes, the most striking single fact about Amelio's films—setting him apart from all the neo-realists, too—is their complete absence. No kiss has ever crossed his screen; he has even claimed he would not know how to film one. It is probably this abstention from what is, after all, the most popular of all cinematic themes, common to high and low forms alike, that has deprived Amelio of the international fame his predecessors enjoyed, and which he certainly merits—though this may also have something to do with a general marginalization of Italian films, for other reasons. Whatever the causes, there is no doubt that the world at large has yet to realize that Italy possesses a true successor to its greatest directors. Amelio's originality, it might be said, is to have crossed the themes of De Sica, Rossellini and Visconti—all three, actually—with the forms of Antonioni. The result is something unlike any of them.

### *Stealing an apprenticeship*

Amelio was born in a family 'even lower than the working class', in a tiny village in the Sila mountains of Calabria in 1945 ('for the first time', he says with a touch of coquetry, and 'again around 1950 with the birth of Cinemascope'). His mother was fifteen and his father seventeen at the time. At the age of twenty-one, his father left for South America and 'came back ten years later as poor as he started out'. Taken at first to films by his grandmother, his favourite adolescent viewing in the movie-houses of Catanzaro was Hawks's *Hatari!*, though he was also struck by the alternative Cinemascope strategies of Kazan and Ray. Arriving in Rome at the age of nineteen, feeling acutely Calabrian, he found a job with Vittorio De Seta on *Un uomo a metà* (1965), then completed his apprenticeship working on spaghetti Westerns made in Spain, and advertisements for liqueurs and aperitifs, including a memorable performance by the singer Patty Pravo at Rome's Stazione Termini amongst a whirl of trolleys. Later he spent a year doing publicity for Alitalia. Unlike Bertolucci and Bellocchio, who were only a few years older but came from well-off, intellectual families in Parma and Rome, he had no chance of making an early debut as a director,

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<sup>1</sup> Goffredo Fofi, ed., *Amelio secondo il cinema*, Rome 1994, p. 14; 'Intervista a Gianni Amelio', in *Gianni Amelio: le regole e il gioco*, Turin 1999, pp. 122–3.

and even when he had started, his career was to be marked by long periods of waiting and interruption.

Amelio's first breakthrough came when the classical cinema of movie-houses had already started to fall into an irreversible decline in Italy, as popular viewing became more and more attached to television. One consequence was that, as elsewhere, films were beginning to be produced directly for the small screen, and production was shifting to TV studios. Amelio's debut, *La fine del gioco* (1970), made for television, was also about it. A journalist, played by Ugo Gregoretti, a famous TV reporter in real life, accompanies a twelve-year-old boy from an orphanage on a train journey back to the village where he was born, intent on making a documentary about him. Badgered by his questions, the boy suddenly gets off the train, discards his shoes and walks barefoot through the fields. The village at which they arrive proves to be as empty as the relationship between the film's two main characters. *La fine del gioco* won immediate recognition for its treatment of a cynical and invasive journalism, and youthful rebellion against it. It appears to conclude with a return to an ancient and frozen past, without the possibility of change.

When the boy turns his back on his investigator, and makes off peasant-fashion into the countryside, we are looking at the founding image of Amelio's own career. The scene condenses techniques and themes that were to become part of his cinematic signature: rigour of visual composition, linkage of pride and separation, destabilization of stereotypes of the South. Here already were aspects of the country that the media of the period never represented. Italian television was born in the studios of Turin at a time when you could still see signs that read 'We do not rent to Southerners', and actual differences of language and customs were so little understood that 'mafia' films were always dubbed in the Catania dialect because it was thought easier for Italians to understand.

*La fine del gioco* could be seen as a development of the line of De Sica and Comencini, and Amelio has certainly owed a debt to them. Italian cinema had, in fact, a long tradition of representing encounters between an adult and a child, in which the child is typically sharper and more mature, the older person weak and worn-out, frivolous or confused. This schema generated some of the most famous works of the postwar

period, from De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* to Dino Risi's *Giovedì*, a remake of the sixties. But by the time Amelio made his debut, children had disappeared from the screen, as the movie industry devoted itself to sentimental dramas, risqué comedies and political films. He was the first director of the new period to return to the child as an emblem of wider processes of radical change, a visual alarm to 'the state of things'.

Amelio's second film was also made for television, with state funding for experimental productions, for which Rossellini's historical reconstructions of Louis XIV or Pascal had set the precedent. *La città del sole* (1973) takes as its central figure Tommaso Campanella, the Calabrian monk whose utopian vision of an egalitarian community in the seventeenth century anticipated many of the ideals of modern socialism. Amelio's sympathy with Campanella's revolutionary version of Christianity, accused of heresy by the Church, is plain. Collision with the feudal order preserved by Spanish rule in Southern Italy was preordained, and the film shows the increasing spiral of violence that resulted. Viewers are invited to reflect on the roots of cultural and economic oppression in the South. This was an extraordinarily bold departure for Italian television at the time, and Amelio was unable to make any more features for some years, teaching instead at the *Centro sperimentale*—the state film school—in Rome.

In the mid-seventies, Amelio got permission from Bertolucci to make a documentary on location about the shooting of his saga *Novecento*. The film—*Bertolucci secondo il cinema* (1975)—captures interviews and pauses in the production of the epic, while Amelio operates as a kind of 'movie thief' bent on catching everything going on: big-shots of the backstage, minutiae of the star-system, from the Hollywood actors to the director in his white scarf and Borsalino hat. Most pointedly, Amelio would use the same frames as Bertolucci, while scenes were being shot, but position his own camera to shoot them from a quite different angle to that of Bertolucci's multiple machines—in its own way, a graphic expression of the 'class battle' Amelio felt he was waging against the social advantages of a contemporary he envied, and whose slide towards Hollywood spectacle he would later contrast with the indigenous Italian tradition of Visconti.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Amelio secondo il cinema*, pp. 37–9.

Professionally, shooting Bertolucci on set was the real way to learn how to make films, he once remarked. Otherwise, however, it was therapeutic. When he was able to make his own again, they could hardly have been more different. The title of *Il piccolo Archimede* (1979) evokes another celebrated philosopher from the South. Made for television from a short story by Aldous Huxley, set in the Tuscan countryside, it juxtaposes two distant worlds, represented by a thwarted Anglo-Saxon professor and a brilliant boy of peasant origins, intuitively gifted for advanced mathematics and music. Through the difficult relation between teacher and pupil, Amelio creates a vision of Northern and Southern cultures mysteriously linked by a series of abstract clues, austere tracked to a sudden denouement—the possible suicide of the child. Breaking with the rule that all Italian films are post-synchronized, the final scene is shot ‘live’, with the real voices of the actors. This chilling work—which Amelio has actually criticized for an ‘excess of emotion’—was a great critical success, but got no distribution; it was only seen at film festivals.

### *Sons and fathers*

If in *Il piccolo Archimede* the child was tacitly victim of the adult, in Amelio’s next film the relation would be brutally reversed. At the turn of the eighties, Amelio was instructed by the television authorities to make a film on terrorism—a theme he greatly disliked, as an obsession of the official culture of the time, and on which he was clearly expected to produce a bien-pensant tract. Instead, he turned the subject against its exploiters, taking as his theme what he has called ‘the demonization of terrorism’, which he viewed as a major political mistake that prevented any understanding of its causes in Italy.<sup>3</sup> *Colpire al cuore* (Blow to the Heart, 1982) shows the fifteen-year-old son of a university professor at Milan developing the suspicion that his father is colluding with a pair of former pupils involved in terrorism. The boy methodically spies on his father, reports him to the police and eventually summons a massive hit-squad to seize him. With an extraordinary narrative delicacy that discriminates against none of the characters, Amelio avoids any political posturing or moralizing judgement. The coldly vulnerable teenager, whose mixture of ‘progressive’ correctness

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Beyond Neorealism: An interview with Gianni Amelio’, *Cineaste*, December 1995, pp. 12–3.

and social conformism turns him into a parricidal informer, is treated with sympathy, even tenderness, throughout.

With an artist's intuition, Amelio sensed the coming of a hardened generation, moved more by ambitions than ideals, out of the moral and mental darkness of the period. This was not the edifying message the Italian state wanted. Amelio was forced to insert a small but incongruous concession to trite sentiment towards the end, and punished by the authorities for his 'bad performance'.<sup>4</sup> *Colpire al cuore* won critical recognition as a tour de force, and made Amelio's name as a national director. But Italian television, which had commissioned the film, did its best to kill it. Only five years later was it shown for a second time on the small screen, and it was not until 1988 that Amelio was able to make another film.

Employment finally came with a commission to make a three-part television series based on a novel by Leonardo Sciascia, *La scomparsa di Majorana*, about a group of gifted young scientists working under Fermi on the first experiments with nuclear energy in the Physics Institute of Via Panisperna in Rome, in the early nineteen-thirties. One of them, Ettore Majorana, had mysteriously disappeared; Sciascia believed that he had glimpsed the tragic logic that would lead to the creation of an atomic bomb, and committed suicide. Amelio discounted this notion as far-fetched, on the grounds that the military implications of splitting the atom lay too far in the future for anyone to be moved by them at the time. The elegant film he made of Sciascia's story focuses instead on the complexities of the relationship between Fermi and Majorana, a pupil potentially more brilliant than his teacher, and the dynamics of the group that included Bruno Pontecorvo, Edoardo Amaldi and Emilio Segre. *I ragazzi di via Panisperna* takes an exemplary look at the new ruling class of the period, and the rules and transgressions of scientific and social life under it—Fermi's accommodation to fascism contrasting with Majorana's lack of adaptation. The enigma of Majorana's vanishing is left open, as Fermi sails off to fame and fortune in America.

Amelio has regretted the bio-pic format that was imposed on him, saying he would have preferred not to have to deal with real-life characters, given the pre-established expectations that typically surround them.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Intervista a Gianni Amelio', pp. 132, 136, 142.

Here, however, the disappearance of the central character evokes other absences: the disappearance of so many members of the Italian ruling class, not only during the war, but also in more recent times; or the many deaths—those who destroyed their own lives, those who went into exile, those who became zealous supporters of the dictatorships—in the more enlightened upper classes of Latin America; or of the young in the East, who had just begun to experience freedom before falling back under surveillance or obscure repression.

### *Criminal and judge*

If one Sciascia story was the buoy that allowed Amelio to continue working, a second finally freed him from television. *Porte aperte* (Open Doors, 1990) is another tale based on an actual event—a trial in Palermo in 1937 of an accountant fired for fraud who, on the same day, murders the boss who sacked him, the colleague who took his place, and his unfaithful wife. Given a free hand to adapt the original by Angelo Rizzoli, a powerful producer, Amelio—working for the third time with script-writer Vincenzo Cerami—significantly altered the structure of the narrative. We are accustomed to films that dumb down the novels on which they are based: simpler and coarser versions of a literary text are virtually a rule of the medium. But Amelio once again achieved the rare feat of generating a more complex translation. Sciascia's plot concentrates overwhelmingly on a judge in the case who tries to suspend the death penalty—and nearly succeeds, before higher authorities intervene, executing the condemned and exiling the judge to the interior; the criminal himself scarcely figures in the novel.

Amelio's film, by contrast, constructs a vivid portrait of an unrepentant killer, once a devoted fascist—Ennio Fantastichini gives an extraordinary performance—whose motives are never fully elucidated, even if mitigating circumstances are clear; but whose psychological strength proves at least equal to that of the judge himself. The result is far removed from the American-style courtroom drama which had come back into fashion in that period; let alone from TV programmes like *La Piovra* which exported stereotypes of a mafia-ridden Sicily all over the world. Meticulous in its recreation of a late-fascist Palermo, *Porte aperte* is still—by reason of its relatively lavish production values, and too kindly a lanky magistrate—the closest thing Amelio has ever made to a commercial film, winning indeed an Oscar nomination. Understandably,

he has shown some discomfort with these aspects of it. But it was the box-office success of this movie, made directly for the big screen, that gave him the freedom to become for the first time a pure *auteur* in his next.

*Il ladro di bambini*—‘Stolen Children’, as it was entitled abroad—appeared in 1992, the year that the scandals of *tangentopoli* broke over the political scene, revealing the depths of the corruption that had eaten into Italian state and society since the late seventies, and shaking the post-war Republic to pieces. There is no doubt that the impact of Amelio’s film came, in part, from the devastation of that moment: it could be seen as a kind of landscape of the country’s moral decay. But even in calmer times, it would have registered as a masterpiece. Liberated from constraints, here Amelio returned to his starting-point in *La fine del gioco*. The film opens with a brief sequence of shocking violence: the trapping of a paedophile businessman in a dismal apartment block, where a woman prostitutes her eleven-year-old daughter to him, while her nine-year-old son sits on the staircase outside, disconsolately fingering the money his mother has given him. Police burst onto the scene, seize the man, haul the mother away to jail. When the credits have passed, we see the two children in the charge of a young *carabiniere*, Antonio, at Milan station. The rest of the film follows his quest to find an institutional home for the two, a train journey that takes them via Bologna to Civitavecchia, where a prosperous Church-run orphanage turns them away (‘We can’t put the girl with the others . . . no medical certificate’); to Rome; to his sister’s home in Calabria, where the initial welcome turns cold when Rosetta is identified from a photo on the cover of a scandal-sheet; and finally to Sicily where Antonio is accused by his superiors of abduction.

This abortive pilgrimage down the peninsula yields a longitudinal panorama of Italy that deftly establishes each local setting in the North, Centre and deep South. But, unlike so many films that have played on the geographical contrasts of the country, here the deliberate effect is the opposite: everywhere the young policeman and his charges go, there are the same sordid officials, the same widespread cynicism among ordinary people, well used to large-scale speculation and corruption of every kind. Against this backdrop of all but unchanging ugliness, the real movement in the film occurs in the triangle of travellers themselves. Antonio, a guard initially incompetent and impatient of his charges, gradually develops compassion for them, but proves more fragile than either. Luciano, the small boy who misses nothing—a classic but forgotten



device of the cinema: it is no accident that he rarely talks—watches his sister during most of the film with sullen contempt. Rosetta, more unusually, starts to emerge from her hardened chrysalis as a small, stubbornly protective and independent woman. Amelio's locations and camera-work in the final sequences of the film, a brief moment of idyll on a beach near Ragusa—before the random incident in Noto that brings disaster to the young *carabiniere* as he tries to do his duty by a couple of French tourists—deliberately recall sequences of Antonioni's greatest work.<sup>5</sup> *Il ladro di bambini* closes with a reprise, more moving than the original, of Monica Vitti's gesture of reconciliation with her disgraced lover: Rosetta putting her coat over Luciano's shoulders as the two sit alone on the roadside, in the cold of dawn.

### *Adriatic crossings*

The critical and public success of *Ladro* persuaded the Tuscan football and media magnate Cecchi Gori—the Centre Left's answer to Berlusconi—to give Amelio carte blanche to make a number of bigger budget movies. Two years later, he brought out his most ambitious film to date: a veritable voyage to hell in post-Communist Albania. As the credits of *Lamerica* start to roll, insets on the screen show stentorian fascist newsreels of Mussolini's annexation of Albania in 1938, celebrating Italy's conquest of its neighbour. Next, we see the arrival of a couple of crooked Italian businessmen, out to acquire a derelict shoe factory in the Albania of today. Since local regulations require an Albanian chairman, they find a human ruin who has all but lost his mind after a lifetime in Hoxha's camps, to act as a scarcely intelligible straw-man. Scared and demented, he promptly disappears, leaving the younger of the two carpet-baggers, the Sicilian Gino, to track him down.

But when Gino finds the old man again in a hospital, stripped of his belongings by child robbers, he discovers that he is actually an Italian, imprisoned after the war, who still thinks himself the twenty-year-old he was when conscripted for service by the Duce. On their journey back to Tirana, Gino loses his car to tyre-thieves and is transported with his compatriot on a truck packed with Albanians,

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<sup>5</sup> 'Intervista', pp. 121–2. Amelio explains how determined he was to seek out and re-shoot *L'avventura's* exact locations.

some dying, trying to get to Italy. When he learns from his partner that the fraudulent venture has collapsed, Gino abandons the old man—only to be arrested for corruption in Tirana, deprived of his passport and reduced to destitution. The film ends with him on board a ship overwhelmed by Albanian refugees, clinging to every inch of it, like so many seagulls to a rock; he is one of them. Here Gino once again encounters the old man, who tells him cheerfully not to be downcast, since they are both young and will soon be arriving at their destination—‘Lamerica’, as it was called by emigrants of the last century, as if by shortening the name they could get there quicker.

A film of enormous energy and power, *Lamerica* is a complex work. Amelio shot it in Cinemascope, partly because of its panoramic sweep, but also because he wanted, as an Italian making a film there, entirely on location, to create an anamorphic estrangement of Albania. There is no question of his success in this. *Lamerica* presents a terrifying fresco of a society in complete dissolution, through the medium of an adventure film that is a road movie without petrol, a nightmare at 100 degrees without water—like the immigrants’ ship. Ismail Kadare, Albania’s greatest writer, has complained that his countrymen are represented as so desperate as to be virtually servile. Amelio, perhaps partly in response to this criticism, has claimed that he had no intention of trying to make a *Tirana città aperta*—suggesting that his Albania is no more than a metaphor for Italy itself, the true subject of the film.

This is an understandable reaction, but protests too much. Amelio did not spend a year travelling back and forth to get a sense of Albania for nothing. His film is a visionary landing on a coastline so close to Italy that it can be seen with the naked eye, destination of weekend outings in the thirties; an outpost of Communism barely 30 miles away, whose radio boasted for years of a ‘complete electrification’ of the country which, we now know, meant only darkness. The scars of Hoxha’s rule are indelibly etched into the landscape of bunkers and slogans—and the forlorn dreamscape of illusions about the world beyond it—through which Amelio’s protagonists pass. But *Lamerica* is also a savage indictment of the small-scale piratical road to free enterprise that is bringing a leprous capitalism to Albania today, a reduced version of operations conducted on a grand scale in Italy itself. The first twenty minutes of the film, as the two sharks descend on

Tirana to set up their fake firm, are designed as ‘a sort of brush-stroke on the vulgarity and horror of our time’—the present of *both* countries.<sup>6</sup>

The narrative is then displaced diagonally towards the character of the old man, who becomes the real centre of gravity of the film as the senior fraudster drops out (Amelio has compared this movement to the drift in *L'avventura* after Lea Massari—its original focus—disappears). The quest across the countryside becomes a voyage into the past, dominating the rest of the film. Gino is utterly ignorant not only of Albania but also of the history of his own country. The ex-prisoner who becomes his companion, on the other hand, is completely unaware of the present, arrested forever in the epoch of his youth. Gradually, they discover their common Sicilian origins, only to find themselves stripped of all national identity at the end, refugees with thousands of others trying illegally to get to Italy—or America, as the old man insists in his bewilderment. The layers of meaning are charged and multiple here. Amelio has explained that one deep impulse in *Lamerica* came from the memory of his absent father, driven to Argentina without avail, in ‘a painful and tragic emigration’. The desperate mass exodus of Albanians across the Adriatic, their arrival traumatizing Italian public opinion in the nineties, figures in *Lamerica* as its contemporary counterpart. These two great migratory waves, merging in the final scene, lend the whole film its energy. The haunting icon of the big ship on its way to Brindisi, crowded with innumerable faces, is a universal image. For Italians, it is a powerful visual link to the world of poverty from which we have come, to a period in our past relegated by an entire nation to a kind of collective amnesia.

### *Southern maladies*

Here lies, no doubt, the main reason why Amelio’s most recent film has proved so unpopular. If De Sica is present in *Ladro* and—despite everything—Rossellini in *Lamerica*, with *Così ridevano* we enter Visconti territory. Comparison with *Rocco and his Brothers* is inescapable. In the 1950s an illiterate worker, Giovanni (Enrico Lo Verso—Amelio’s lead actor in all three of his last films) arrives in Turin from Sicily, ready to undertake any kind of work to help his younger brother Pietro graduate from teacher-training college, where he has already learnt to be ashamed of the dialect to which his sibling is confined. Giovanni believes that the

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Entretien avec Gianni Amelio’, *Positif*, December 1994, pp. 26–7.

only road to social advancement is through the acquisition of culture but, trying to make his way in Turin, ends up as a small-time *mafioso* and killer, while Pietro rejects work and studies alike.

The fate of Southerners in the North is, of course, a long-standing theme in Italian cinema. Amelio's film met with a barrage of hostile criticism and public rejection because it defied so many traditional expectations of the genre. *Così ridevano* does not present internal emigration as a violent deracination or tragic ordeal. Amelio, who has frequently expressed his aversion to a certain Southern *vittimismo*—‘the real Southern malady is the feeling that abandonment and pride are a privilege’—believes the move to the North in post-war Italy should be seen as a normal demographic flow, quite unlike the trauma of overseas emigrations, bringing less a deracination than a chance to enrich native roots.<sup>7</sup> In fact, his film focuses more on the inadequacies of the Southern immigrant than on what the haughty kindness of the Northern city has to offer—here represented in terracotta colours of earth and blood, rather than the perennial grey of the Turinese fog, in which all destinies merge.

*Rocco and his Brothers* has strong melodramatic features—like all Visconti's cinema, with its affinities to opera. Amelio's story of brothers, too, is not without elements of melodrama, but here they are scoured of any glamour: there is no Nadia to provide sexual heat. Poverty and tension are redeemed only by the strange fraternal passion that, in the end, leads Pietro to assume the crime Giovanni has committed. We see the fear inspired in those around them by ordinary people who bring with them different cultures, speak an incomprehensible language and use their own traditions to get by. Despite Amelio's disavowals, part of the shock caused by the film was the sensation of seeing ourselves as, only yesterday, little better than Albanians, in a country that has become increasingly intolerant and, perhaps, even more racist than under fascism.

The film's relationship to the past it depicts is in this sense, as in others, radically unsettling. Much of it is like a minefield, where certain scenes have no correlates in reality, but draw their power from a tangle of repressed thoughts. Amelio—in another choice that disconcerted critics—does not represent any of the familiar historical features of

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<sup>7</sup> *Amelio secondo il cinema*, p. 43

the period: the cultural vitality of Turin, its growing prosperity, the major industrial struggles and sophisticated political debates of the time. Any hint of nostalgia is banished. The Turin we see on the screen is very similar to the wealthy city of today, which systematically excludes those from other cultures. The combative working class of the period—1958–1962—is absent, just as it is almost invisible today. The red flags that mean nothing to the main characters in the film are, likewise, more or less blanks to most contemporary viewers. Yet our very distance from that post-war period appears, mysteriously, on the screen: figures who were vital within society, but who have never found a space in the cinema, come alive in the resolute black and red of Luca Bigazzi's camera-work. *Così ridevano* is a dark film, offering us little consolation. The voyage to the North yields only disillusion—the pessimistic conclusion that 'Italy after the fifties, which we hoped would be enriched by culture, in reality has lost even the memory of it'.<sup>8</sup>

Last year Amelio returned to the South, for what can be seen as a coda. He made a documentary on a region devastated by the earthquake of 1982, a natural disaster worsened beyond measure by political corruption and neglect—filming places like Conza, an abandoned town destroyed by three successive quakes, and Lioni, where seven hundred people still live in asbestos prefabs ('we are used to it by now, we have lived here for twenty years'). *La terra è fatta così*—the title comes from the words of a woman he interviewed—tells the story of a South which is a seismic zone in a series of ways: a region of literal earthquakes, of uprootings in search of work to survive, of jerry-built constructions wrecking the coastline, of desolate mountain villages in Calabria. The peasant world has vanished and development has levelled customary ways of life, erasing differences between people, without any of the inherited problems of the past being resolved. Such is the 'Southern Question' today.

The power of Amelio's cinema comes from an underlying fidelity to this background—whose principal expression, however, is not any particular repertoire of social themes, but an extraordinary consistency of psychological preoccupations. Every one of his films is constructed around the tensions between two individuals, related and separated not by sex, but by age or knowledge. Father and son—*Colpire al cuore*; teacher and pupil—*La città del sole*, *Il piccolo Archimede*, *I ragazzi di Via*

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<sup>8</sup> 'Intervista', pp. 143–4.

*Panisperna*; guardian and ward—*Il ladro di bambini*, *Lamerica*; reporter and story—*La fine del gioco*; judge and criminal—*Porte aperte*; elder and younger brother—*Così ridevano*. Women are absent or marginal in this narrative world, with the one exception of Rosetta, still a child, in *Ladro*—where, uniquely, the binary pattern gives way, although the decisive moment of communication remains between man and boy. Within this insistent structure, the order of relations is typically reversed: children are stronger than adults, pupils more gifted than teachers, the straw-man may comfort the con-man. Normally, a universe controlled by such deep psychodynamic motifs would be at a far distance from the collective issues and passions of politics. The mystery of Amelio's art lies in its denial of this expectation. Many Italian directors have claimed—often enough noisily and narcissistically—a position on the Left. But in the last thirty years, none has produced a cinema of the Left to compare with Amelio, who has never any made fuss about his politics. He has said he would perhaps like one day to make an Italian equivalent of *Heimat*.

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