

Voyeurism and Desire Keeping *The Right Distance*

Our society is, indeed, one of surveillance: Foucault would have found much to theorize in the new millennium, where privacy has been lost, the internet (superficially and probingly at the same time) provides all the information one needs, and cameras all over public spaces observe individuals' every move. It is also a society of spectacle: pervasive, unavoidable, fascinating in spite of one's better judgment. In the age of reality shows that blur the line between the private and the public and make the obscene an object of fascination, Carlo Mazzacurati's *La giusta distanza* (The Right Distance) portrays voyeurism with a *retro* flavor. In the fictional town of Concadalbero, on the Veneto side of the Po delta, an interesting game of seeing and being seen develops, relying just on people's sensorial perceptions or on the information that can be gained with outmoded technology. What Baudrillard calls "the ecstasy of communication"—the saturation of public and private spaces with intrusive, overpowering media—has not entirely reached this small town of the Italian countryside, prey to the usual brand of gossip and curiosity but empty of billboards, televisions, or pervasive ads typical of contemporary living. The only media everybody seems to consult is the local newspaper (*Il Veneto*) and the only technology a portable digital camera and the internet, even in its primitive dial-up form. Interaction is largely left to the direct gaze, tinted by individual desires or prejudices. When alien elements disrupt the town's routine to the point of unleashing irreparable violence, what ends up triumphing is not an understanding of facts and people aided by science and technology (as in modern investigative fiction), but rather the human element, old-fashioned low-tech investigation based on instinct and the will to rectify wrongs.

Mazzacurati's film is more indebted to Visconti's *Ossessione* and to Antonioni's *Storia di un amore* than to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* or to any of De Palma's murder mystery or *CSI* spin-off; real locales, an almost documentary portrayal of the countryside with no apparent attempt to embellish, an attention to contemporary issues, the use of non-professional or unknown actors along with better-known ones: everything points to a re-invention in modern terms of neorealist concerns and subsequent manipulations of setting to create specific

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moods, as Antonioni does. The director himself refers to his style as “neo-irrealismo” (neo-unrealism)¹ to point out that, regardless of how recognizable film locales and characters’ feelings and reactions may be, a film is always a work of art, a product of manipulation of reality rather than an imitation of it. By the same token, by coining this catch-term he also establishes a connection with those masters of Neorealism who certainly influenced him and the mood of his films, particularly in this “Polesine brumoso e quotidiano.”² Two-thirds of the way through, the film that looks like a *Bildungsroman* and the story of an interracial relationship on the backdrop of a quiet town, turns into a murder mystery. Even though in this search for the prurient, hidden secrets of a quiet small town the narrative resembles Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, there is nothing truly sordid, no sexual taboo, no endemic violence to unveil in the Italian provinces. Finding the real killer is important, but not nearly as much as witnessing the young protagonists’ personal growth, the affirmation of the dead man’s dignity, and the solidarity of friends faced with a hostile community that unquestioningly protects its own.

The story is rather simple: a young elementary-school substitute teacher arrives in a small town, is coveted by many, and spied on by a high-school boy of eighteen and by the local mechanic, a Tunisian immigrant respected by the whole community. When the teacher, Mara, discovers Hassan spying on her, she is at first upset but is eventually won over by the man’s discreet charm and starts an affair with him. Called away to her next job in Brazil earlier than planned, she is forced to leave the man who has fallen in love with her. She is found dead one morning and Hassan is accused of her murder. Giovanni, the boy with journalistic aspirations through whose eyes we see the story unfold, first believes, like everybody else, that Hassan is guilty, and then, once the man’s sentence is confirmed by the Court of Appeals and he kills himself protesting his innocence, returns to the town he had left for a job at the newspaper *Il Veneto*, investigates the murder, and clears Hassan’s name. The story is told in voice-overs by Giovanni, who has access to Mara’s e-mail, since he installed it and stole her password, and who functions for the viewing public as a hard-boiled detective, small-Italian town style.

The establishing shot of the film is a panoramic aerial view that shows the Po River delta, setting of several neorealist films and

protagonist of this one as well. The camera slowly zooms on the river and its bank to end up focusing on the journey of a blue S.I.T.A. public bus that follows the river bank and on the young busdriver. The film's mystery is already contained in this first shot, which does not just give viewers an idea of the setting, but a key into the mystery's solution. On a bridge, after the bus passes, we meet Giovanni aboard an old Ape car with a scrap collector. Together they find a rusty old bike and take it to Hassan's shop to repair. The first interaction with the Tunisian mechanic debunks stereotypes about Arabs as shifty, dishonest types. In fact, Hassan quickly assesses the origin of a foul smell coming from a hysterical owner's SUV and does not charge him. He is also respectful of family hierarchies when he tells Giovanni that without his father's permission he cannot keep the bike. Next we meet Giovanni's family and we are introduced to his passion for writing as he rectifies in a letter a mistake made by the local newspaper. In less than ten minutes we are introduced to most major characters in the film. Then we meet Mara: she gets off the same blue bus we have seen in the beginning and crosses the town pulling her suitcase on the way to her rented house in the outskirts. The bus' arrival enters a still frame of the main street of the town, flanked on both sides by houses in a perspective that evokes a traditional theatrical setting. She gets off and starts walking confidently, looking at the people looking at her from store fronts, private houses, and fenced gardens. Curiosity and diffidence for the element extraneous to the community mixes with Mara's gaze; the only person smiling at her is the owner of the tabaccheria (and of the SUV of the earlier scene), who clearly finds her pretty. From the beginning, Mara is the object of the community's gaze and of sexual objectifying; at this stage in the film she still has an active role in returning the gaze; later on, unaware, she will just receive it passively.

Once installed in her new house, which has huge windows on both floors opening onto the vast, empty, manicured countryside, as she is changing a light bulb in the kitchen at night, standing barefoot on the table in a short slip, Mara is watched by Hassan who is hidden by darkness among the trees. The camera's perspective is Hassan's, following the contours of her body from ankles to raised arms. We, the audience, become voyeurs with him, violating Mara's private space. At the same time, Giovanni, who while helping Mara set up

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her e-mail account and had stolen her password, is reading the e-mail written earlier by Mara to her friend Eva back in Tuscany: a jump cut to Giovanni's face reading from the computer screen in his room turn us into double voyeurs, now also able to hear her inner thoughts, once again violating her private space. We hear her voice while Giovanni reads, as images bring us back to her yoga routine on the floor, to her preparations for the night, putting cream on her legs in panties and bra and a skimpy open white robe. The film at this point displays a purely male gaze, that of two males who abuse Mara's privacy, dragging the audience into the objectification of her body and mind. The windows in Mara's house function for Hassan as a movie screen, a transparent "fourth wall" that allows him to access her image, while the computer screen allows Giovanni access into her words; each man is seduced by Mara's being. Her different dimensions trigger pleasure: for Hassan it is the display of her body, usually hidden in his culture, and for Giovanni it is her words. His dream is in fact to become a journalist, someone who uses, manipulates, twists, and "caresses" words as one would a female body. Her words on the screen become "an allegory of death" (Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 145) in what Baudrillard calls hyperrealism, i.e., the reproduction of the real through another medium (here the computer and in his job later on also in print). The real (Mara's life) "becomes *reality for its own sake*, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination" (145). After all, the first time we see him writing to *Il Veneto* to rectify the mistake made in publishing the wrong picture of a female athlete he admires, Giovanni acts anonymously, transferring from medium to medium his knowledge of the real, but not exposing himself—virtually remaining an information voyeur. The idea of the spectator as a "desiring" but also fetishizing "subject" in Metz's theories of cinema, as Susan Hayward points out, already presupposes that "the subject is male in its positioning" (285); in this film the audience focuses on the object of the gaze of two men, and becomes their accomplice in a game of male desire, to the point of sharing their fantasies and frustration. Two other men desire her, Amos, the rich and vulgar owner of a *tabaccheria*, and Guido, the driver of the bus that brought Mara to town. The overtness of Amos' advances and the caginess of Guido's repressed interest

prevent identification on the audience's part.

In a later scene we see Giovanni in the dark watching Hassan watching Mara. At this point in the film it becomes clear that the filter and owner of the gaze is the young man, who shares in his storytelling his passive, irresistible compulsion; because of it, the audience identifies with his voyeurism, not Hassan's. Giovanni's interest in Mara's thought process de-sexualizes her for the audience, thus eliminating the problem of a purely male spectator's gaze posited by Hayward. Moreover, since his obsession does not turn explicitly sexual, the audience feels at once absolved of guilt and even further drawn into the game of watching what happens, now more clearly engaged in a psychological game that goes beyond prurient scopophilia. Through his reading of Mara's e-mails, Giovanni exercises his fantasies of investigative journalist, dispassionate bystander, potential lover (before he discovers Hassan watching her), and voyeur of Mara's life. As Todd McGowan explains,

There is, according to Lacan, a form of the *objet petit a* that corresponds to each of our drives. The gaze is the *objet petit a* of the scopic drive (the drive that motivates us to look), functioning in a way parallel to the breast in the oral drive, the feces in the anal drive, and the voice in what Lacan calls the "invocatory" drive. The *objet petit a* is in each case a lost object, an object that the subject separates itself from in order to constitute itself as a desiring subject. (6)

Giovanni defines himself as desiring subject through his passive and anonymous observation of the world first, by watching Mara (and Hassan) and by accepting to become a nameless reporter, who exposes his town's little secrets in unsigned articles. Through his actions he also defines the viewing public as desiring subjects.

As Steven Shaviro writes, "visual fascination is a passive, irresistible compulsion, and not an assertion of the active mastery of the gaze" (8): spectators are compelled to follow Giovanni's telling of the story because his imagination becomes visual for them. For instance, in the above-mentioned scene, when Giovanni reads Mara's e-mail, as in all similar scenes, the director chooses to show us the

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mundane events of Mara's new routine. As Giovanni reads, he reports what she describes for the audience's benefit, already fulfilling his calling as journalist who makes private events public. As the reading progresses, we become onlookers, just as the rest of the town, except for the fact that we have a more privileged view; in "the obscenity of complete, transparent vision on the one hand, and the hidden play of seduction on the other" (Shaviro 9), we are seduced into becoming part of Giovanni's community. There are two specific scenes that shed light on the role of the audience in the film as passively viewing community; in both the camera pans on the faces of the town's inhabitants as they watch a spectacle. The first one is after a party at night, celebrating Amos' (the tobacconist) lucky fishing trip; the old teacher, who in a sudden onset of early dementia has lost touch with reality, somehow manages to untie the ferry and passes on the river at night, sitting on the ferry, all dressed up, purse on her lap. The town's reaction, standing on the riverbank as the ferry passes, is bewilderment and compassion for one of their own who has left the world of logical thinking. The second scene is the finding of Mara's dead body, face down in the water; once again, the town watches Mara, surely with sadness for the violent end of a young life, but with more detachment, since she was not a long-standing member of the community. We watch them looking at the two events and then the perspective switches to them looking at the mad teacher and the dead one, while we become one with their gaze. In both cases there is an alternation of first-person (plural), subjective camera perspective, and a reverse angle shot with a slow pan on the faces of the onlookers: the audience identifies with the community's perception in the former and is simultaneously alienated from the fact in the latter. In both scenes the return gaze on the crowd comes from an agent as passive as the viewing audience: the demented teacher in the first scene, someone whose agency is counter to the laws of accepted logic and who is silently sitting and turning vacant eyes to the shore, and Mara's dead body, who is face down in the water. Technically the audience does not return anybody's gaze, but its inert body is as much an accusation to the crowd who finds Mara too late as a silenced witness of extreme violence.

Interestingly, the two men's passive gaze is inherently quite

impotent: Giovanni is a boy with a crush on a worldly woman ten years his senior, who is going to Brazil on a humanitarian mission, drinks *bancha* tea, and feels exotic for the mere fact of being foreign to the town. Hassan is an Arab who has turned down an arranged marriage in Tunisia, whose sister is happily married to a Moroccan and wears a hijab, and whom we see looking at migrant prostitutes at a gas station at night, without taking anyone into his car. Because of her age, experience, and culture, Mara is out of both men's leagues. Moreover, their watching her, albeit creepy, puts her on a pedestal: Hassan's culture allows him only to watch her from afar, rendering him unable to take a step towards a woman he respects (not a prostitute), but who is also much freer than the women culturally destined to him (therefore suspect and object of a curious, inquisitive gaze). In psychoanalytical terms, as Žižek notes discussing Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, "the male controls the field of vision, whereas the status of woman is that of the privileged object of the male gaze. [...] the gaze does connote power, yet, simultaneously, and at a more fundamental level, it connotes the very opposite of power – *impotence*" (73). On the other hand, the two men who objectify Mara as a sexual being and who are not passive voyeurs, Amos the tobacconist and Guido, the bus driver, have no problem grabbing Mara and letting her know in no uncertain terms she is wanted. Their active advances turn to violence and eventually lead to her death.

Power dynamics shift when Mara realizes she is being watched by Hassan. As Robert Stam and Roberta Pearson observe in their analysis of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*

Voyeurism renders desire as a purely visual activity... [The voyeur's] invisibility produces the visibility of the objects of his gaze. But the frame, the rear window, which guarantees the innocuous integrity of the visible for the voyeur and thus his pleasure, remains intact only so long as the viewing remains surreptitious. (Stam and Pearson 204)

Hassan is exposed as a voyeur, just as L.B. Jefferies is in Hitchcock's film, but, unlike Jimmy Stewart's character, his private *jouissance* does not end with his exposure; on the contrary, it becomes active.

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Mara is never as disturbed by Hassan's violation of trust as her friend Eva, whose barking dog unmasks the voyeur; she reprimands him as she would a naughty child: "Non devi più venire, hai capito?"³ She is just as "maternal" in a later scene, once the man has made several attempts at apologizing, when she reconnects to him by talking about his niece, who is in her class. The hunted becomes huntress in a now conscious game of seduction that takes agency from the passive man and turns him into an object of desire. The morning after their lovemaking, Mara, from his apartment's window above the mechanic shop, watches Hassan working; the desiring gaze is now hers. It is reciprocated by Hassan glancing upward; her gaze is not passive: in fact, it is the proof of her agency, even though, interestingly, she is still in an enclosed space (his apartment) while he is freely watching her from the outside. Her conscious gaze is still liminal, through a window, from a place of captivity or encasement, and her position is still symbolically at a higher level (his window in on the first floor).

The cultural differences between Mara and Hassan quickly turn into distancing forces once Mara realizes his love for her leads to marriage. After he proposes, unexpectedly at a party for Amos' lucky fish catch, Mara is torn between her genuine interest in the man and the absurdity of being asked in marriage after sleeping with him once. What for him is a rebirth ("ho sentito la vita dopo tanto tempo,"⁴ he writes on a note left by the coffee maker in the morning) for her this is the beginning of an affair that in no way would make her change her plans and prevent her from seeing the world. Her Brazil is as much a place of the imagination as Italy probably was for Hassan, with the notable difference that Hassan was moved to migrate by hunger, not by a desire to travel, as he shouts angrily to Mara the day before her earlier-than-expected departure (and before she is killed). Both her unreachable Brazil and Italy disappoint in reality. As an immigrant, Hassan, as well as his sister and her family, is subject to ignorant discrimination and easy targeting. As Hassan shouts at her that their motives for travelling are different, Mara recoils in a submissive stance and decides it is useless to try to talk while he is angry. The object of desire should not have a stronger mind than the desirer. For both Giovanni and Hassan the objectification of their gaze denies the woman's pleasure: in Giovanni's case she is unaware of being watched

and in Hassan's case her pleasure is conditional to her surrendering of her freedom to travel and exist without Hassan. His exposure and subsequent consummation of his/their desire paradoxically leads to distancing: as Baudrillard observes, "there is nothing seductive about truth. Only the secret is seductive" (*The Ecstasy of Communication* 64). Before they both become too involved and do not keep "the right distance" both men live their relationship with Mara as one would a reality show: she is a construct of their imagination as they watch her perform routine tasks in the privacy of her home. What makes a difference is that Mara's life is real and not the staged narcissistic fantasy of nobodies clamoring for their 15 minutes of fame in a reality show, aware of the cameras rolling and taking pleasure in displaying what should not be shared with a viewing public. As Baudrillard declares, "the spectacle, even if alienated, is never obscene. Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication" (22). Mara is not putting on a show for their benefit, hence her witnessed display is obscene – something that should not be watched – and their watching her is a violation of her private sphere, as they turn her reality into an aesthetic experience.

"One thing is for certain: if the scene seduces us, the obscene fascinates us" (Baudrillard 26): the display of Mara's dead body is also obscene, as well as the consequent ultimate violation of having her affair exposed in a court of law, which denies her agency and misinterprets her thoughts, once again denying her pleasure. Giovanni's quick assumption that Hassan must be guilty and his consequent distancing from the man's fate turns us into unwilling accomplices of Hassan's ultimate sacrifice in the name of a truth no one wants to hear. Losing our guide to the events for a while creates a distance for us from the Tunisian's fate. We become unwilling accomplices (because we know Hassan must be innocent) of the town's refusal (as well as the country's through its justice system) to extend the same basic ethical rights to those outside the community. Both Mara and Hassan, in that respect, are foreign to the community of Concadalbero, disturbing agitators of an apparently tranquil routine. However, there is no overt racism in the film – objectification of the foreigner, exploitation

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(sexual or otherwise) yes, but without malice, until the murder occurs and the culprit must be the Arab the misguided girl let into her bed. As a matter of fact, the film's small community reflects the reality of Italian life at the beginning of the XXI century, whether supporters of the *Lega Nord* like it or not: there are almost five million legal immigrants in Italy out of a population of roughly 58 million: circa 8%, without considering the illegal ones, which would be impossible. The bartender is Chinese, the *piadina* maker is Moroccan, Hassan, the mechanic, Tunisian, and Amos' wife a Romanian internet catalogue bride. They all seem well woven into the fabric of the town. Even the North African and Eastern European prostitutes at the gas station are part of an accepted reality. But when Hassan takes the object of many people's desire, he becomes a little more hateful. Following Freud's suspicion, Žižek argues that the neighbor is "a traumatic intruder whose different way of life (or rather, way of *jouissance* materialized in its social practices and rituals) disturbs us, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails, when it comes too close" (59). In the case of a foreigner, "what 'bothers' us in the 'other' ... is that he appears to have a privileged relationship to the object – the other either possesses the object-treasure, having snatched it away from us (which is why we don't have it), or poses a threat to our possession of the object" (71). Hassan and Mara's *jouissance* denies the community's, and a member of it punishes her with death for having snatched away his own *jouissance*. As passive onlookers, we share in the guilt of the town, which watches impotently other recurring deaths in its midst during the whole film. A mysterious dog killer kidnaps and guts dogs, leaving them on the side of the road for everyone to see: once again, an obscene display of violated bodies the town is unable to stop, perpetrated by an anonymous killer. The presence of the dead dogs carried away in stretchers or left in the dust from the very beginning gives the film a feeling of unease and a foreshadowing of more violence to come. Not all is quiet in the apparently calm town where hidden desires are revealed violently.

Giovanni eventually discovers who the real killer is, prompted by Hassan's sister's request once her brother's body has been taken away. Her relaying of Hassan's message ("Cara sorella, scusa per il male fatto a voi, ma sono innocente"⁵) and Giovanni's recognition of

the body on a hospital gurney through another kind of writing, the ink of the snake tattoo on Hassan's arm, is enough to convince him that the distance he kept at the first (and second) trial was not right. His mentor at *Il Veneto* had warned him that a good journalist must be detached, not too much or pathos gets sacrificed, but also not too involved, or emotion kills the story. Giovanni rationalizes his belated but just involvement as an overstepping in the zone of excessive closeness to a subject of investigation that eventually redeems Hassan's name. However, it is his closeness to Mara and Hassan's story from the beginning and his willingness to share in the collective guilt of a hasty judgment that is the indirect cause of Hassan's death. Giovanni's passive gaze involves him in two deaths, even though in the end it leads him to take action and pushes him to become a man, as is confirmed by the opening of a new chapter in his life, employment in a national newspaper. By the end of the film Giovanni finds a voice through his active, unconcealed investigation into the cold case of Mara's death, but also name at the end of his article, and a new career. He becomes a desiring subject whose separation from the Lacanian "lost object" of desire allows him finally to find the right distance.

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NOTES

¹ "È lo stesso regista ad aver parlato di 'neo-irrealismo' sintetizzando, con questa formula, i caratteri stilistici della sua opera e alludendo al tentativo – certamente riuscito – di caricare di densità simboliche storie minime, situazioni marginali, personaggi senza qualità della provincia italiana" (it is the director himself who spoke of 'neo-unrealism' synthesizing in a catch-term the stylistic traits of his work and alluding to the certainly successful attempt to charge with symbolic meaning minimalist stories, marginal situations, characters without qualities of the Italian provinces), in Daniela Giannetti, *Il Lavoro*, 5 settembre 1987.

² "Misty and quotidian Polesine," Michele Gottardi, "Mazzacurati, o della giusta vicinanza" *Circuito Cinema*, n. 8, novembre 2007.

³ "You mustn't come back, do you understand me?" –All translations of the film's dialogue are mine.

⁴ "I felt life after so long."

⁵ "Sorry for the pain I have caused you. I am innocent."

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