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Compounding the Lyric Essay Film: Towards a Theory of Poetic Counter-Narrative

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Artists and critics refer increasingly today to a diverse range of contemporary films as lyric or poetic essays – from Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Forgetting Vietnam* (2016) to Patricio Guzmán's *The Pearl Button* (2015), from Alexandr Sokurov's *Francofonia* (2015) to Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog* (2015), to cite some of the most recent and better-known examples. Lyricism is indeed acquiring increasing relevance as one of the key modes adopted by an artistic practice that is spreading fast throughout the globe. Yet, the lyric essay is still substantially undertheorized. This may be explained by the impression that distinctive features of the lyrical such as affect and sublimity are at odds with the essay's characteristic rationalism. While acknowledging that the essay film's voiceover can include the lyrical mode, for instance, Timothy Corrigan described the lyric as being almost at odds with the essayistic:

> With a perplexing and enriching lack of formal rigor, essays and essay films do not usually offer the kinds of pleasure associated with traditional aesthetic forms like narrative or lyrical poetry; they instead lean toward intellectual reflections that often insist on more conceptual or pragmatic responses, well outside the borders of conventional pleasure principles.[1]

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The lyric, however, may be said to be at the root of the essay as form, if we consider that linguistic eloquence is one of its constitutive features, so prominent that Max Bense in a 1947 contribution described the literary essay as existing on the frontier between prose and poetry.[2] In 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', György Lukács refers to poetry as the 'sister' of the essay,[3] and to essays as 'intellectual poems' (p. 34). From Horace with his *Epistles* and *Ars Poetica* to Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and *Essay on Man*, from Thomas de Quincey to Virginia Woolf to Aleksandr Blok, many are the authors who wrote essays in the form of poems or in a lyrical prose. In film, then, the lyric is clearly distinguishable throughout the history of the form, as testified by the examples of Chris Marker, Marguerite Duras, Alain Resnais, Forough Farrokhzad, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Agnès Varda, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Joris Ivens, and Manoel de Oliveira, among others.

The apparent contradiction between lyricism and argumentation –emphasized also by literary critics, who believe the term 'lyric essay' carries a 'slight implication of literary nonsense'[4] – may promote a view of the lyric as a simple addendum, an aesthetic surplus that does not partake of the logical argument. A similar attitude of relegation may be observed in relation to the narrative component of essay films, which is often characterized as just a fictional layer superimposed on documentary matter – a layering that has frequently been described as the essence itself of the essay film, in a way that presupposes the primacy of the nonfictional. Conversely, I argue that the essay film is not merely a hybrid, a documentary film with an added fictional ingredient; rather, narration is to be seen as a constitutive element of the essay's epistemological and signifying strategies. Argumentation and narration are not in contradiction; as Harun Farocki has remarked: 'to me, narration and argumentation are still very closely linked. I strongly hold that discourses are a form of narration'.[5] Narration, indeed, *is* discourse. Needless to say, narration is not simply equivalent with narrative voice and, thus, written

text; narrative mode and style, point of view, focalization, ordering of events, and temporality are some of the elements that participate in the telling of a story. And this telling can of course be shaped by its encounter with the lyric.

But what is the relationship between narration, lyricism and argument in the essay film? With its effects of textual fragmentation, incompleteness and lacuna, and its emphasis on affect and sublimity, the lyric may be described as a counter-narrative mode. Here, I will discuss how lyricism works at once with and against the essay film's narrative strategies, thus contributing to essayistic discourse. In so doing, I wish to expand on a first reflection on this topic, with which elsewhere I begun to examine lyricism as a locus of textual affect, seen as a powerful epistemological tool, and as a mode that runs contrary to the essay's scepticism, thus creating a dialectics that contributes to argument.[6] The aims of this chapter, accordingly, are to refine the theoretical and analytical tools that are at our disposal to think about the lyric essay film, and to expand our understanding of how lyricism is used by filmmakers to create audiovisual spaces for thought. In doing so, I will draw on a specific case study, the cinema of contemporary Italian filmmaker Pietro Marcello, whose experimental essayistic work is elegiac and political all at once. I will begin by briefly discussing lyricism in the cinema, and in the lyric essay film in particular.

Thinking poetically

I have submitted above that the impression of an inherent contradiction between lyricism and essayism may part explain the lack of theoretical work on the lyric essay film. Another reason could be the difficulty to pinpoint the lyric itself, in literature and even more so in the cinema, with its characteristic multichannel textuality. The discussion of the poetic in film has often relied on analogy. Filmmakers and film historians alike have most frequently associated the lyric with avant-garde films made since the 1920s,

although this association becomes less prominent by the late 1960s. Abstract, experimental films without apparent or strong narratives have been likened to poetry, an analogy based on the fragmentation, symbolism and evocative aestheticism of these films, which seemed to be more akin to poetic composition than to narrative. Although most of the existing literature focuses on avant-garde cinema, a lyric tone or approach is not confined to these forms, and the term lyrical has been paired to many narrative films, especially those that include poetry in verse, or in which narrative is deemphasized. Writing on Andrej Tarkovski, for instance, Stephanie Sandler commented that 'the judgment that a film is poetic usually means that the story-line has been displaced by an emphasis on mood or atmosphere'.[7] Indeed, lyricism and narrative in film have often been deemed to be at odds. These discussions, however, have tended to remain impressionistic, with some notable exceptions that display attention for structures and the specificity of film language, starting from Maya Deren's famous distinction between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' meaning in literature and in film, 'horizontal being the forms of meaning made clear through the developing narrative of a work, and vertical the multiple *layers* of meaning that accrue in forms of expression normally considered poetic'.[8] One of the most thorough (and controversial) readings of lyric cinema is Pier Paolo Pasolini's article 'The Cinema of Poetry' which, with its focus on film semiotics and the 'free indirect point-of-view shot', corresponding to free indirect discourse in literature, attempted a theorization of an authorial art cinema.[9] Through the crafting of obsessive techniques that coalesce into a personal style, the cinema of poetry for Pasolini allows for a counter-narrative subjective expression in which the ways of seeing of character, camera, and author are aligned in the optical point-of-view shot. P. Adams Sitney then drew on both Pasolini and Gilles Deleuze to analyze poetic temporal and camera techniques in narrative and experimental films that mediate individual consciousness.[10] The accent, as can be seen, is always on the expression of a singular authorial stance and

a personal poetics that places the director at the centre of a creative discourse of idiosyncratic individual expression. It must be noted that none of these reflections pertain to documentary as a discrete category.

Literature on poetic nonfiction has tended to highlight its connections with the modernist avant-garde. In particular, Bill Nichols describes the 'poetic mode' of documentary, an example of which is Joris Ivens's *Rain* (*Regen*, 1929), in terms of its renunciation of the conventions of continuity editing and of the construction of a clear spatiotemporal narration, and its reliance on patterns, rhythms and associative links:

> The poetic mode is particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution. This mode stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped.[11]

In relation to the essay film, then, references to a lyric component may be traced as early as André Bazin's article on Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1957), famous for being one of the earliest critical interventions on the form. Bazin therein described *Letter from Siberia* as 'an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well'.[12] For Bazin, Marker's film places the intelligence of language at the core of its essayistic argument; however, Bazin does not comment further on the lyric aspect.

A recent article, also on Chris Marker, offers, to the best of my knowledge, the most articulated discussion to date on poetry and the essay film. Focusing on *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* (*The Last Bolshevik*, 1993), David Foster claimed that in this film 'Marker interweaves analysis of historical and political issues with the metaphorical connections,

reflexivity, and lyric subjectivity characteristic of poetry'.[13] In his discussion of Marker's practice, Foster draws on Gerhard Richter's definition of *Denkbild*, or 'thought-image', as practiced by Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Siegfried Kracauer, a method that 'brings together the critical and philosophical mode of essayistic writing with the personal and experiential mode of lyric poetry in dialectic tension'.[14] Foster stresses that *Denkbild* is, firstly, a practice employed to produce a subjective voice (and it must be noted that the subjective voice is key not only to the experience of the lyrical, but of the essay too). The lyric's function, however, extends beyond it: 'One of the central lyrical features of the *Denkbild* that Richter identifies in Benjamin's work is the negotiation of the *rechten Abstand* or the 'right distance' and the *richtigen Bickwinkel* or the 'proper perspective".[15] Distance is crucial to the adoption of a critical stance that must mediate the subjective involvement of the essayist in the subject matter. Thus, for Foster the notion of *Denkbild* can support an understanding of the function of lyricism in the essay film as a way to guarantee a balance between subjectivity and critique – the same balance that Marker strived to reach in his portrait of his friend, Soviet filmmaker Alexandre Medvedkin in *The Last Bolshevik*.

Foster's discussion is a useful starting point for two reasons; first, because it references dialectics, which I have come to understand as central to the workings of the essay film (Rascaroli). Dialectics is also a resource of poetry. In an article on the online blog, for instance, Sven Birkerts uses the term 'lyrical' to refer to essays that,

> do not necessarily march forward logically but present their elements associatively, sometimes without obvious connective tissue; or they combine their materials more in the manner of collage, juxtaposing several themes or kinds of narrative sequences. In some ways, they adopt the resources of poetry.[16]

I indeed see lyricism in the essay film as a counter-narrative strategy, one of the many strategies that the essay may use to create a dialectical tension and, as a result, textual interstices within which new audiovisual thinking can emerge. And poetic fragmentariness is a structure of gap that can be imitated by the essay, as Ander Monson has indicated:

> In order to accommodate gap, the essay must ape the poem – it must create an openness, an attention to beauty rather than meaning, at least on the micro-scale, it must jump through gaps and continue on, an elision of the white space on the page.[17]

The second reason for which Foster's article is useful is because it emphasizes the question of the fashioning of subjectivity, ultimately attracting attention to further important gaps: those between essayist and narrator, and between narrator and subject matter. The subjective stance is crucial to the essay film, which must embrace a contingent perspective, yet also attain critical distance. The lyric, then, is shown to have a structural functioning in the special textuality of the essay film.

Starting from these premises, in what follows I will make sustained references to the literary theory of the lyric with a view to advancing our understanding of just such structural function. My interest lays in understanding the role of lyricism in shaping the essay film's thinking – hence, in its capacity for thought. As already mentioned, my hypothesis is that the lyrical in the essay film is not subordinate to logical thinking or separate from it as an addendum or a supplement; rather, it is argument and instrument of argumentation.

Learning from Pietro Marcello: lyric counter-narrative, elegiac reversibility

My discussion will draw on the cinema of Italian filmmaker Pietro Marcello. Since 2003, when he directed his first shorts, Marcello has authored several nonfictions, including *Crossing the Line* (*Il passaggio della linea*, 2007), first presented at Venice Film Festival; *The Mouth of the Wolf* (*La bocca del lupo* 2009), Best Film and FIPRESCI Award at the 27th Turin Film Festival, and recipient of a number of other prizes including the Teddy Award – the official queer award at the Berlin International Film Festival; *The Silence of Pelešjan* (*Il silenzio di Pelešjan*, 2011), on the cinema of Armenian auteur Artavadz Pelešjan, first presented as a special event at the 68th Venice Film Festival; and the docufiction *Lost and Beautiful* (*Bella e perduta*, 2015), which screened in the main competition at the 2015 Locarno International Film Festival.

Frequently described as neither wholly documentary nor wholly fictional, with its noteworthy mix of vérité, performativity and lyricism Marcello's work raises questions, on the one hand, on the nature of nonfiction in its relationship to the historical world and, on the other hand, on the conception of the essay film as a form of logocentric and rational audiovisual thinking. Before I start to examine the role of the lyric in his films' thinking, I want to debunk the conception that poems are a highly subjective form that is in radical contradiction with documentary. In doing this, I draw on Jonathan Culler who, in his major intervention on the theory of the lyric, writes that 'Poems are real-world utterances, albeit of a special kind'.[18] Lyrics offer truths about our world, and in this they are not unlike documentary:

> The epideictic element of lyric, which certainly involves language as action but not of a fictionalizing kind, is central to the lyric tradition [...]. Lyrics do not in general performatively create a fictional universe, as novels are said to do, but make claims (quite possibly figurative ones) about our world.[19]

This concept is key to my understanding of the lyric essay, and of Marcello's nonfiction cinema. Lyricism, in this sense, is part of his films' real-world utterances, though it is different in status from their vérité components.

I will focus here on two of Marcello's films, starting with *The Mouth of the Wolf*, commissioned by the Genoese Jesuit community Fondazione San Marcellino. Most reviewers touched upon its poetic images and soundtrack and its elegiac tone. The film was mostly seen as a hybrid of documentary and fiction containing two distinct narratives. It was described as follows, for instance, for its exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on 4–10 August 2011:

> Pietro Marcello's hauntingly beautiful debut feature interweaves two love stories: the 20-year romance between a Sicilian tough guy [Vincenzo Motta aka Enzo] and a transsexual former junkie [Mary Monaco] whom he met in prison, and a poetic reverie of the Italian port town of Genoa, depicted in all its mysterious, fading glory. […] *The Mouth of the Wolf* masterfully combines documentary with fiction and melancholy home movies from the past century with poetic images, sounds, and music of the waterfront today.[20]

The so-called 'poetic reverie', which is made up of three sections placed at the start, middle and end of the film, has generally been seen as the fictional part of the film, versus the nonfictional story of Enzo and Mary. This description, however, is unsatisfactory, given that the real story of Enzo and Mary is told not only via traditional, vérité documentary elements, but also fictional tools such as stylized reconstructions and reenactments, and references to narrative cinema and popular culture, for instance in the presentation of Enzo almost as a figure out of a gangster film. Conversely, the visual

track of the reverie sequences is entirely nonfictional, being based on documentary images and archival material, in particular amateur and industrial films. Lyricism, however, is confined to the reverie sequences, and this seems to be the reason why critics have described them as fictional – in agreement with the assumption that the lyric is at odds with documentary.

The presence of the lyric in the film is most evident in the poetic voice-over commentary, written by Marcello and voice-acted by Franco Leo. As Culler writes, 'The production of first-person speakers has been central to the lyric tradition'.[21] Poems are the statement of a subject; such speakers, of course, are not a personal 'I', but a linguistic function, although, as Paul de Man has argued, 'The principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice'.[22] In the cinema, of course, such a phenomenalization is not just performed by the spectator but can be actualized by the film through voiceover, as happens in *The Mouth of the Wolf*. The male voiceover, which opens the film, re-emerges in its middle (which I will refer to as the 'Intermezzo' sequence), and closes it, is clearly situated. It speaks with elegiac pathos and a Genoese accent, and posits itself as a lyric 'I' stemming from the city, implying that the film as a whole emanates from such an 'I'. The text it recites is inherently lyrical. Published as verses in the book that accompanies the Feltrinelli-published edition of the DVD, it may be described as an epic. The pathos with which the voice actor delivers it only strengthens the impression. This poetic text is oracular in character and delivers truth-statements about our world, such as, in relation to a group of homeless who find fragile shelter on a beach: 'The new cave dwellers: / They are no fishermen / Neither are they sedentary / They are men who migrate. / We do not know their stories / We know they have chosen [...] found this place, and not others / To feel safe, not far off a road which turns into city'.[23]

The lyric, however, does not just reside in the pleasure of the words, figures of speech, alliterations, images and metaphors. The poetic text is filmically woven with images and sounds. The image track draws both from original footage of the Genoa shore, with its 'caves' inhabited by 'abandoned castaways', as the voiceover also calls the homeless, and from grainy archival footage of the town, its seashore, its port and factories, extracted from a range of amateur and industrial films. The soundtrack includes music that intensifies the pathos of the sequences, as well as the sound patterning of sea waves. The sound of rolling waves is indeed central to the film's lyricism, as it produces rhythm, which is a fundamental component of the lyric. Images also create rhythm; this can be seen, for instance, in the grainy archival footage of the opening title sequence, with the repetitive gesture of slow-motion diving bodies, which may be said to operate as a rhyme. In the Intermezzo sequence, then, the images shot from a train travelling on a bridge create patterns of light and shadow and evoke the sound of carriages on tracks, even without including it. The train sequence, incidentally, is remindful of another film by Marcello, *Crossing the Line*, which exploited the rhythmic sound of travelling trains to lyric purposes.

In *The Mouth of the Wolf*, the reverie segments are characterized by an oracular, meditative rhythm made up of words, sounds and image patterns. The repetitiveness of rhythm, like refrain, 'disrupts narrative and brings it back to a present of discourse', as Culler writes.[24] Similarly, the production of a lyric 'I' attracts attention to the act of enunciation, as does the breaking of continuity, contributing to the film's self-reflexivity. *The Mouth of the Wolf* is, indeed, a profoundly self-reflexive text, which nods to a number of genres and forms, including realism, melodrama, the gangster movie, vérité, the cinema of peripheries and slums, Fassbinder and Pasolini. Here, however, I am not interested in highlighting the components of the film's self-reflexivity, but the effect of

narrative disruption introduced by the lyrical, and to reflect on how this disruption contributes to the film's thinking.

The story told by the film is that of Enzo and Mary's extreme marginality, of their relegation due to their outcast, lumpenproletariat status and, especially in Mary's case, non-normative sexual and gender identity. The film constructs a slow, progressive revelation of their story, and of Mary's voice and body in particular. Mary's voice, indeed, floats, unanchored to a body, till the very last section of the film, when she finally appears on screen as herself, next to Enzo. In his discussion of Marcello's film, Oliver Brett has described this process of revelation as a 'désacousmatization', connecting it to Mary's lack of diegetic speech in the first part of the film (for much of the film she is only heard in voiceover) and her concomitant occasional, inconspicuous visual appearance as 'an unnoticeable 'object among other objects" [25] – a strategy which makes it impossible for the spectator to connect her voice to her body till late in the narrative. Narrative construction and dramaturgy, then, underline the issue of the inaudibility of queer voices and invisibility of non-aligned bodies, while telling Enzo's own story in a linear fashion. His is a chronological biography of lost childhood, early involvement in crime, a fateful shootout with the cops, a series of convictions, the unconventional, redeeming love story with Mary, the present life with her in their shared house. But the film comes across as much more than a documentary on Enzo, his biography, and his relationship with Mary. So, the film's argument is made somewhere else. I argue it is the disjunction between the lyric on the one hand, and the vérité elements and reenacted scenes on the other hand, that delivers what I will describe as a utopian political argument. The lyric, accordingly, is not a supplement, or aesthetic excess, or individualistic stylistic marker, but is necessary to the essayistic argument, which would not be in the film without it.

At a first, self-evident level, the lyricism of the film, with its high register and aestheticizing power, lends nobility to the social actors and their stories, which would normally be regarded as belonging to the realm of the unsightly and the grotesque, and thus deserving of a lower register. The reverie sequences, then, with their oracular force, hyperbolic language, and the sublime power of rhythm, break the documentary narration and its chronological temporality, with its dramaturgy of progressive revelation, thus connecting Enzo's biography not only to the history of Genoa, which is a linear story too, but also to the eternal, circular struggle of human life. Enzo and Mary, and Genoa and its inhabitants, therefore, become the representatives of the cyclical human story of homelessness and precariousness, displacement and fight for survival. Furthermore, Enzo, Mary and the 'abandoned castaways' are not the only fragile, unsightly subjects aggrandized by the film's lyricism. *The Mouth of the Wolf*, indeed, places on the same level the ephemerality of humans and that of film, thus raising the aesthetic dignity of amateur and industrial footage, normally seen as banal, imperfect, even unsightly. So, the invisible bodies and inaudible voices of both outcast characters and outcast footage are redeemed by the lyric.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Caption – Lyricism of found footage. ***La Bocca dl lupo*** **[*The Mouth of the Wolf*] Pietro Marcello ITA 2010) Indigo Film. Screenshot.**

Such redemption is to be seen as part of the film's broader reflection on time and the passing of all human things, including the end of the epoch of the industrial expansion of the port of Genoa. This is a meaning that develops in the gap between the reverie sequences and the documentary parts of the film. If the narrative constructed by the documentary sections is chronological, the reverie sections break and reverse the

narrative order by going back in time, from today to the history of Genoa in the twentieth century, to the history of the unification of the country, back to a mythical past. Through the reveries the film reverses its forward narrative movement, as becomes visible in the Intermezzo, in which a piece of amateur footage, shot in the old city's alleyways at night, is literally reversed, so that the camera moves back from its subjects, some prostitutes waiting for clients. This literal and narrative backward movement of the reverie sequences, a form of counter-narration that undoes the forward chronological movement of the documentary narration, replicates the structure of elegy, which 'replaces an irreversible temporal disjunction, the movement from life to death, with a reversible alternation between mourning and consolation, evocations of absence and presence'.[26] The single human beings' stories, thus, are at once situated in the historical time that produced the conditions of their existence and woven into the cyclical temporality of human experience. With this, the film does not refer to an a-historical condition, however, but to a perpetual situation of exclusion and marginalization of the weakest subjects in society, from the humble redshirts who answered Garibaldi's call and did not return from Sicily, to the homeless of both the past and the present building fragile shelters to cope with the winter, to Enzo who was introduced to illegality as a child by his father, to Mary who was exiled by her middle-class family on account of her gender transgression.

I claimed earlier that the lyric gives a voice to the inaudible, as well as visibility to the unsightly and the unseen. With this, I did not mean to say that the voiceover replaces the marginal subjects' voices with a display of rhetorical prowess. The film emanates from a collective lyric subject that uses the first-person plural, 'we'. This collective subject could be seen as the voice of the city, or of humanity itself, or of the poet as cantor or chorus, and calls on us, the audience, to feel at one with the lyrical voice, which speaks for us too, as we speak through it. Thus, when a recording of Enzo's voice

addressing his loved one starts straight after the first reverie, it is instantly lent the authority to speak and be listened to, in a film in which voices are allowed to tell their own story, entirely in their own words. So, the lyrical in the film is at the core not of an aestheticizing/consoling function, or of the construction of an authorial style, but of a political argument about the inaudibility of marginal voices and, ultimately, of the value even of lives that are always in danger of being swallowed by the mouth of the wolf.

The redemption of inaudible subjects is equally at the core of *Lost and Beautiful*. The voiceless here are primarily Sarchiapone, a young male buffalo who is literally meat for slaughter, for it cannot produce milk and is, therefore, unprofitable and unwanted, and, at a broader level, the beautiful and lost country of the film's title, an echo of the fatherland invoked in Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* ('*Oh mia patria, sì bella e perduta*' / 'Oh my country, so beautiful, and lost'), as well as the title of an important historical treatise by Lucio Villari on the Italy of the Resurgence.[27] With 'country', however, the film refers not so much to nation, but to a multilayered entity that includes the nature and culture of a territory. These terms too require clarification. Nature in this film is the natural world deeply wounded by human exploitation and, specifically, the so-called Triangle of Death (*Terra dei fuochi*), an area in the Italian province of Campania poisoned by Camorra-run illegal landfills and fires of toxic refuse, which registers higher levels of cancer-related mortality than the rest of Italy. Meanwhile, culture refers to both the regional culture of agricultural and artisanal traditions, dialect and expression, habitus and worldview, and the artistic patrimony, here represented by the Bourbon Royal Estate Reggia of Carditello, an abandoned seventeenth-century hunting lodge designed by a pupil of Vanvitelli, and by hidden antique treasures subtracted by tomb raiders. Another inaudible subject in *Lost and Beautiful* is Tommaso Cestrone, known as the Angel of Carditello, a local herdsman who took care of the Reggia on a voluntary basis since 2011, finally dying of a heart attack there on the night of Christmas 2013, after fighting, amidst threats to his

person and family, to protect it from looting and keep it clean of the refuse that littered the estate. Cestrone repeatedly attempted to sensitize the Italian authorities to the importance of restoring the Reggia and open it to the public, something which eventually happened after his death, in 2017.

The film is a startlingly hybrid text that mixes vérité, fable, and lyrical elements. The documentary material includes footage of public protests, archival and amateur images of farm work in the area and of the theft of archaeological artefacts, and images of and interviews with Tommaso Cestrone, who is followed by the camera around the Reggia. After Cestrone's sudden death, however, the dominant tone of the film became that of the fable. The Neapolitan mask of Pulcinella was introduced, in his original role of intermediary between the dead and the living. Pulcinella (Sergio Vitolo) is tasked to take Cestrone's young buffalo Sarchiapone to safety, and accompanies him north, finally leaving him with Gesuino Pittalis, who plays himself as a poet and a shepherd of the Maremma region. Pulcinella, who is first seen in a liminal world in the depths of Mt. Vesuvius, is designated as a servant without free agency, but is able to hear Sarchiapone's voice and talk to him. Once Pulcinella decides to break free from his servitude and become a man, however, he loses his faculties, and Sarchiapone is abandoned to his destiny of certain death in the slaughterhouse.

If the fable as a genre typically anthropomorphizes, animates inanimate objects, and gives a voice to the voiceless, the purpose and tone of Marcello's film is not moralistic. The lyric too, of course, is a form that gives voice to those who lack one, and in this film it sides with the fable, while also going beyond it, thus pushing *Lost and Beautiful* into the realm of elegy. The most evident lyric elements of the film include poetic language, in the form of both poetry (in particular, Gabriele D'Annunzio's poem 'Settembre', recited by Gesuino Pittalis) and of lyric prose, which characterizes Sarchiapone's speech, as well as an excerpt of 'Il silenzio della ragione' ("The Silence of

Reason'), a short story by Anna Maria Ortese originally published in 1953, here read by a woman from the past most likely representing Ortese herself (Anna Redi), who appears one night in a farmhouse bedroom where Pulcinella lies asleep.[28] The ghostly woman describes the 'hidden ministry for the defense of nature from reason', a 'maternal genius of unlimited power'. The lyrical may also be said to reside elsewhere, for instance in the use of a different grain of the image, due to expired 16mm stock, or to the insertion of newsreel and amateur footage, and in the elegiac use of classical music.

The lyric import of the film was broadly recognized by critics. Claudio Panella, for instance, identified in the lyrical both the dominant tone and the underlying structure of the film, suggesting that it is precisely the lyrical that keeps the radically hybrid materials and formats of *Lost and Beautiful* together:

> At a visual level, Marcello bravely manages to hold together the POV shots of the buffalo, made with an old crank camera, the travelling shots in the meadows in front of the Reggia, some inserts from amateur archives and various other shots in different formats. All this is accompanied by a soundtrack comprizing mainly classical music that, more than re-formalizing the 'wilderness' of nature and of the casting of peasant non-actors, aims to support the purely poetic taste that dictates the pace and development of the film.[29]

In what follows, however, I will focus not on the unifying function of the lyric, but on its disruptive potential and its ability to produce argument.

The tone of the film is deeply elegiac. As mentioned, elegy replaces the irreversible temporal disjunction caused by death, and the forward linear progression of narrative, with a reversible temporality, thus creating an alternation of mourning and consolation. *Lost and Beautiful* fully embraces such reversibility. Death is a pervasive

element of the film – from the placards with photographs and names of the ill and deceased of the Triangle of Death region, carried by their protesting relatives, to the death of Tommaso Cestrone, which threatens to put an end to the film itself, to the ultimate fate of Sarchiapone, which dominates the entire narrative from the start. Yet neat divisions are subverted, first and foremost by the character of Pulcinella, who can equally communicate with the living and with the dead. We also see a dead tree on a hill that is said to be a shortcut to the underworld; and tomb raiders from both the present and the past enter and exit graves, defying separations. Evocations of absence and presence, then, are the context of the apparition of the ghostly female figure from the past.

Beyond the fable-like elements of the film, however, the most significant infringement of the linear temporal progression from life to death is that of Tommaso, who continues to inhabit the Reggia even after his passing, becoming a silent figure that haunts the film, as an elegiac counter-narrative element. Tommaso reappears, for instance, at the end of the 'Silence of Reason' sequence, as if evoked by Ortese's words. He also appears at the very end of the film, in images from his screen tests. In these images, his silence is eloquent and his image powerfully interpellates us.

Voice and voicelessness are central to the film's narrative and argument, if we only think that Sarchiapone is abandoned to his destiny of death in the slaughterhouse once Pulcinella is no longer able to hear him speak. If in *The Mouth of the Wolf* the lyric voice was a singular though collective one, in *Lost and Beautiful* it is multiform and distributed; it emerges from a range of subjects, from Tommaso to Sarchiapone to the ghostly woman. A key point in the film is made by Sarchiapone, when he remarks on the absurdity of man's conviction to be the only being with a soul in the immensity of the universe. It is a conviction with fateful consequences, for it delivers man from his responsibility towards non-human animals, nature, and the territory, all of which can be

enslaved and exploited as non-verbalizing and, therefore, supposedly non-sentient entities. The film's utopian counter-argument is made precisely through the creation of a multi-voiced lyrical subject. By creating a distributed lyrical 'I', that lets Nature as well as both human and non-human animals' voices be heard, *Lost and Beautiful* redeems the voiceless, endowing them with an oracular poetic power that lifts them above their enforced inaudibility.

This poetic power, in both *The Mouth of the Wolf* and *Lost and Beautiful*, does not change the contingent reality in which the marginal subjects of these films live and die – like Enzo and Maria, Tommaso and the buffalos, Genoa's abandoned castaways and the inhabitants of the Triangle of Death. Nonetheless, elegy inserts their lives and deaths into a different, broader, reversible temporality, which subverts their finitude while denouncing the forces and institutions that silence and relegate them.

The aestheticizing power of the lyric essay film

Marcello's cinema is essayistic in the tradition of an experimental, intellectual cinema of test and trial, which combines hybrid materials, from original footage shot both in digital and celluloid, to amateur, industrial, and archival films, and radically different modes, from vérité to re-enactment to fiction. Its powerful lyric components reside not only in words and voiceover, but also rhythm of image and of sound and an elegiac arrangement of temporality. The lyric in Marcello's cinema is not supplement, tone, or stylistic signature, but goes right to the core of the essayistic gesture. An elegiac lyricism is introduced as a form of counter-narration, an undoing of the logic of documentary storytelling and its progressive linear narrative; as such, it produces gaps within which a multivoiced, utopian political argument on the invisibility and inaudibility of marginalized subjects can emerge.

Marcello's cinema, in other words, provides a compelling, though by no means unique or exhaustive, example of the role of the lyric in the essay film. The lyric is a real-world utterance of a special kind, to use Culler's expression, and as such, I have argued, it is not in contradiction with the essay in its role of commentary on our world. It can be used to shape the nature of subjectivity and enunciation, audiovisual rhythm and temporality; it can work against a film's linearity and/or logic, undermining its rationality and its scepticism, and mobilizing affect (on a spectrum that goes from rage to mourning) to produce intelligence. In all cases, the lyric is endowed with an aestheticizing power that introduces in the essay film ineffable visual and auditory pleasures for the spectator; such pleasures, however, are not simply an addendum, a superimposed fictional layer, but are inextricably enmeshed in the essayistic argument.

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[3] György Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper.' In *Soul & Form*, trans. by John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 16–34, (p. 29)

[4] John D'Agata, 'Introduction.' In *We Might As Well Call It the Lyric Essay*, ed. by John D'Agata (New York: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 2014), pp. 5–10. (p. 7)

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[7] Stephanie Sandler, 'On Grief and Reason, On Poetry and Film: Elena Shvarts, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Tarkovsky.' *The Russian Review,* 66.4: (2007), pp. 647–70, (p. 649).

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[19] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 128.

[20] 'MoMA Presents: Pietro Marcello's *The Mouth of the Wolf*.' 2011. *MoMA*. Web, Accessed 30 June 2017.

[21] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 19.

[22] qtd. in Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 35.

[23] Daniela Basso, ed. *Genova di tutta la vita*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 2018, p. 167. (my translation)

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