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## Stealing Home: Flight From Exile in *Il ladro di bambini*

If I had wanted to make a movie based on ideological premises, I would have produced a sort of *Rocco and His Brothers* for the 1990s; I would have depicted the characters moving from South to North, towards the conflicts of contemporary Milan. But I did not plan to convey a portrait of Italy; I meant even less to confer on the South the edifying task of symbolizing a need for cleanliness. The characters are from the South but they travel from North to South because they are ordered to do so. They have neither roots, nor self-conscience. (D'Agostini)<sup>1</sup>

Gianni Amelio, director of *Il ladro di bambini* (*Stolen Children*) expressed these considerations, after receiving the Special Prize of the Jury at the Cannes Film Festival in 1992. His comments seem to prevent a socio-political interpretation of this movie. Understandably Amelio pays the utmost care in order not to be identified as a "political" movie director: evidently he does not intend to offer clear-cut solutions and, therefore, refuses to simplify the complex social reality of contemporary Italy. On the contrary, Amelio strives to depict a *tranche de vie* characterized by multiple outcomes and open to different interpretations.

Many critics have mentioned the tradition of neorealist cinema as one of the main referents of this work. Some of the most famous works of Italian Neorealism define an interpretive structure for *Stolen Children*. The influence of this artistic movement on Amelio's work does not consist only of quotes and tributes to the director's teachers. It is recognizable as a dialogical relationship with previous works of Neorealism which increases the possibility of signification of the movie.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze some of the themes in the structure of *Stolen Children*, to discuss the dialogical relationship it establishes with the neorealist tradition, and to show how this tradition and the social and political phenomena of contemporary Italy are recognizable as sub-texts which influence the perception of the work, in spite of the director's attempt to deny the symbolic value of the characters he has created. The result is a movie which, from many respects, can actually be considered a *Rocco and His Brothers* for the 1990s.

The following is a brief summary of the plot: the narration begins in Milan, with the arrest of a woman accused of prostituting her 11-year old daughter. The girl and her younger brother cannot be left in the care of other relatives, and the father abandoned them after the family moved from Sicily to Milan. The children must be entrusted to an institution and the task of accompanying them falls completely on a young *carabiniere* (paramilitary policeman) named Antonio. His colleague, who should have shared the assignment with him, instead decides to remain in Bologna, and asks Antonio to take care of the children by himself. Most of the movie describes the vicissitudes of the *carabiniere* and the two children, Rosetta and Luciano, in their voyage towards southern Italy. The first destination is an orphanage in Civitavecchia, a city north of Rome. Adducing reasons having to do with bureaucracy the director of the institution refuses the children admittance. But the real motivations have to do with the sordid circumstances in which the girl was involved. Antonio has no other choice but to attempt to leave the children in care of another institution in Sicily which might accept them. The travel continues: in Rome Antonio and the children make a stop at a station of the *carabinieri*, and then go on towards Calabria. There the young officer decides to visit his sister and grandmother who live in the small town where he was born. In this way the children will be able to recover from the long voyage in the train. Antonio's sister is busy with a reception for a girl who received her first communion, and her brother decides to hide the true identity of his young travel companions. He says that they are the children of a fellow worker who asked him the favor of taking them to Sicily. By this time the involvement of the young officer in the children's lives has become a tangible reality. At the same time Rosetta and Luciano have overcome their previous attitudes, respectively, of defiance and obstinate silence, and they both reciprocate Antonio's manifestation of love and compassion. The climax of the relationship between the *carabiniere* and the children is reached when Antonio decides to stop at a beach in Sicily to swim and then treats Luciano and Rosetta to lunch. They meet two young women from France, who are touring southern Italy, and together they visit the cathedral of Noto. When a thief snatches a camera from Rosetta's hands Antonio is able to catch him and bring him to the local police station. The officer in charge accuses the *carabiniere* of kidnapping the children instead of reporting his failed attempt to leave them in charge of an institution. The movie ends with the three characters who resume their travel by car, trying to reach the orphanage.

The structure of *Stolen Children* shows a dynamic of open and enclosed spaces whose juxtaposition reflects the evolution of the three main characters. Their travel towards southern Italy is depicted by means of their re-appropriation of the open space and of the natural environment. The ocean, the beach, the

sunny summer environment, portrayed in the part where Antonio and the children make a stop at the seaside, contrast dramatically with the initial scenes in Milan, inside the constrictive apartment where the crime had been committed. Significantly the climax is reached in Sicily, where the children were born. During the stop in Civitavecchia, which is a maritime town as well, the characters are still depicted as oppressed by their personal tragedies and victims of the anonymity of bureaucracy. In this phase the scenes are still urban landscapes and mostly enclosed spaces.

The situation's improvement, which is defined during the trip from Lombardy to Sicily, not only builds ties of affection among the three characters, but also posits the beach in Sicily as a temporary destination, where Antonio, Luciano and Rosetta reach the peak of their interaction as a symbolic family community. It is not possible to identify a domestic space that might offer a solid ground. Antonio's relatives' house does not represent an alternative to the corruption enmeshed in the children's lives. The illegality of this place of abode creates a parallel with the unlawfulness of Rosetta's prostitution, suffered in the apartment in Milan. In addition, it is precisely during the reception at Antonio's sister's home that the truth of Rosetta's identity is discovered by an inquisitive acquaintance of the family, who does not fail to notice the striking resemblance between Rosetta and a picture published on the cover of a scandal-mongering magazine. In this way the girl is marginalized once more, and the three characters have no other choice but to leave the house and resume their travel.

The depiction of the problems which follow Antonio and the children in southern Italy is consistent with the director's determination of refusing to offer a vision of a mythical Italian South where everything is positive. This is confirmed by the Sicilian origin of the orphanage director in Civitavecchia, who, refuses all the same to accept the children, and by the character of a Neapolitan *carabiniere* who attempts to talk Rosetta into physical intimacy during their stop in Rome. Flavio de Bernardinis comments on the function of different types of space depicted in *Stolen Children* and on the "radical lack of distinction between open and enclosed space" (41). The author astutely sees Antonio's sister's house as a symbol of the environmental debasement of the Italian nation as a whole: "a house which has just been built, very new, and that in its glamorous precariousness is already ruined and dilapidated" (41). However, I would not extend the sense of degradation to include also the natural environment portrayed in the movie. The house in Calabria does not fulfill an alternative function; rather, its constitutive essence underlines the corruption felt by the characters. On the other hand, the marine landscape is suggested as the space where a temporary regeneration is possible. The scene at the beach coincides with the higher point of the relationship between the characters. Significantly,

Antonio is shown not wearing a shirt, as a final stage of liberation from his official role, which he had begun by abandoning his uniform at the beginning of the journey. For the officer the sea represents a way of reliving for a short moment the joyous experience of swimming in his childhood, bringing him closer to the two children.

But it is especially for Rosetta that swimming in the ocean implies a possibility of psychological evolution. This scene is placed in the structure of the work as a moment of ritual cleansing. The girl's ablution is contrasted with the description of the sexual acts the client forced her to perform. Rosetta tells Antonio that the man maintained that she was dirty and always wanted to wash her himself. "But I'm not dirty! I wash myself every single day!" objects the girl, and in this way she shows an intimate need to recover the physical and moral integrity which she feels she has lost.

In *Stolen Children* the picaresque motif of the on-the-road genre is re-elaborated with specific contents, generated by Italy's cultural and political situation. The travel represents, for the three characters, an unconscious search for their cultural roots, a return to the land of their birth, from which they had been expelled as a result of economic conditions and the lack of jobs. If we go back to Amelio's considerations quoted at the beginning of this article, one could argue that in spite of the characters' absence of political consciousness and determination in re-discovering their roots, the common southern origin of Antonio and the children posits them as significant symbols of the social processes which have modified Italian society in the last decades. It is certainly true that we cannot attribute a class conscience to the children, nor to Antonio, whose actions are compelled by a confused sense of solidarity rather than by conscious and willful acts. But, beyond the narrative and the textual requirements, the movement in space from Milan to Sicily assumes a symbolic value, which supplements the director's attempt of depicting reality as it is. The voyage of the three characters from North to South emblematically reverses the process of emigration from southern to northern Italy that characterized the years after World War II. The search for better job opportunities in the northern regions of the country has involved a great number of people, and Antonio himself and the children's parents represent some of the different outcomes and social problems that this type of mass migration has caused. The beginning of the movie depicts Rosetta's and Luciano's family as being destroyed in the process of adjustment to the new environment. The reconstitution of a utopian family nucleus, composed of Antonio and the children, takes place during their travel southward, therefore, the movement away from the environment of Milan is also significant of the spiritual and affective values which signal the characters' growth; it becomes a metaphor of the inner space that the characters move through in order

to meet one another.

However, Antonio, Rosetta, and Luciano arrive at a southern Italy which, as we have seen, seems as corrupted as the North; still, it is the place where they can begin a process of rejuvenation based on their rediscovery of spiritual values. This endeavor is full of contradictions, seemingly so as the end of the movie exemplifies. The last scene shows Rosetta trying to encourage Luciano, telling him that, most likely, he will be involved in the soccer team at the institution where they are going to be assigned. Also, she affectionately puts his jacket over him, because of the cold morning. This change in attitude between the two children sharply contrasts with the hostility and the physical violence between them in the first part of the movie.

The open ending of the story can be interpreted in various ways. The precariousness of Antonio's house and the unsuccessful attempt to assign the children to the institution in Civitavecchia indicate that Luciano and Rosetta's future in Sicily will not be free of difficulties. But the significant change in the children's perspective is that now they have re-constituted a micro-family unit, although Antonio, who represented contradictorily both a paternal and a brotherly figure, has been forced to re-enter into his official role. At the end of the movie he strives not to show any form of affection towards the children. "Mind your own business!" is the answer he gives to Luciano's inquiries about their future, which reproduces Antonio's non-committal attitude at the beginning of the trip. Significantly, at the end of the movie, the *carabiniere* sleeps in the car, while the children are talking about their future. Sleep and drowsiness form a parallel with his re-entrance into bureaucratic anonymity, where there is no conscience of individual destinies.

The director of *Stolen Children* has discussed the end of the movie and the conflicts he felt: "How is it possible," he asks himself, "to conclude the movie by depicting a main hero who falls asleep? It looks as if everything has been narrated in vain" (D'Agostini). During the same interview Amelio says that Antonio "is not able to do more than what he does, because he cannot make it by himself" (D'Agostini). Thus, the director seems to imply the necessity of collective dynamics, as an alternative value for the marginalized group of Italian society.

This perspective is not limited to the marginalization of the southern community emigrated to northern Italy. Amelio is successful in bridging the problems of southern Italian people with other phenomena of discrimination which are part of contemporary Italian society. In the structure of the movie, Rome is charged with a symbolic value comparable to its importance as the geographical and administrative center of the country. The capital of Italy is described as a magnification of the exclusion processes which victimize Antonio

and the children. The few scenes that take place around the main train station in Rome, the Stazione Termini, show a gypsy woman trying to read Antonio's palm, and a drunken homeless man, from whom Rosetta steals a few sips of beer.

The link with other phenomena of discrimination is carried throughout the movie. It is significant to note the analogy that Antonio's sister offers to her guests, in order to apologize for the disorganization of her house: "We live just like the Albanian people," she says, referring to one of the most recent migrations which have attempted Italy as a final destination.<sup>2</sup> Amelio's interest in the sad outcome of the attempted mass-migration from Albania to Italy is confirmed by the project of his next film, after *Stolen Children*, entitled *Lamerica*, which will deal with the shame and guilt that, in Amelio's opinion, the Italian community as a whole ought to feel regarding the precarious conditions in which the waves of Albanian immigrants are forced to live (D'Agostini). The director maintains that "Italy certainly must have had its political excuses, but, nonetheless it occurred that a people just a few kilometers away from us has remained in a child-like position also because of our responsibilities" (D'Agostini).

It is interesting to note the definition of a "child-like people" used by Amelio, which takes us back to the vicissitudes of Luciano, Rosetta, and Antonio, and confirms the interpretation of these characters as symbols of the infantilized and subordinated position in which the southern Italian community is maintained. The movie can be seen as engaging in an implicit dialogic relationship with recent social and political phenomena that have taken place in Italy. In addition to the issues related to Albanian immigrants, another sub-text which is implicitly discussed is the development of the separatist movements in northern Italy, the Leagues, which have obtained consistent success in the regions of Veneto and Lombardy. Their demagogic rhetoric tends to attribute several problems of contemporary Italian society to the negative influence of the southern Italian community. In fact, the initial proposition of these movements was to separate the Italian territory into a northern and a southern part, and, as a result, force the southerners who live in the North to go back to their place of origin. It should be said that this type of demagogy, as well as the innumerable scandals which have involved traditional Italian parties, have paradoxically resulted in a consistent success of these separatist movements even outside northern Italy.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, several political exponents of the Leagues have somehow toned down their radical position. Their discrimination against other groups of non-Italian immigrants, African and Albanian, for instance, remains unchanged.

The movie *Stolen Children*, on the other hand, depicts a process of positive affirmation on the part of the three main characters. They re-discover personal values inside themselves while traveling towards their place of origin. They symbolize all southern peoples, and all the immigrants who have chosen Italy as

their new home. Their spiritual growth is a stance against the political infantilization of southern people, as they invert the spatial movement of the emigration from North to South. The end of the process does not signify the necessity of recreating a new ghetto, as the separation envisioned by the politicians of the Leagues clearly implies, but the necessity of spiritual growth in contact with the land of birth.

The theme of emigration, so conspicuous in the structure of the movie, can also be analyzed in reference to autobiographical episodes pertaining to the life of the director. Amelio himself points out that in this work he wanted to portray his personal life to a greater extent than in previous movies: "Antonio is myself, I don't make any effort to identify myself with him" (Piccini 20). The character of the *carabiniere* in *Stolen Children* is, therefore, a reference to the director who left his birth place in Calabria and moved to Rome. But Antonio shares many characteristics with Amelio's father who "had moved to Argentina . . . emigrated because of poverty, and had left wife and children back home" (Aspesi). The absence of paternal figures in the movie has autobiographical implications, and provides another level of interpretation as a critique of "the uprooting suffered from both fathers and children" (D'Agostini).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the autobiographical influences and the references to the political situation of contemporary Italy *Stolen Children* also establishes a dialogic relationship with other Italian works of cinematography. Nicola Siciliani de Cumis has compiled a list of definitions used by movie critics at the appearance of the film. Among them are abundant references to the tradition of Italian Neorealism, because Amelio's work shares many characteristics with the movies made in this phase of Italian cinema. The director himself points out that *Stolen Children* is not based on a literary work, but is inspired by a piece of news:

The paper *La Repubblica* published a strange, ambiguous picture. Under the title "Rape in Milan: A Mother Prostitutes Her Daughter," you could see a little girl carried in the arms of a man seen from the back . . . . The caption said that he was a policeman who was carrying the little girl away from the house where the crime had been committed (Gili 2). This attitude is common to movies like *Shoeshine*, *Open City*, and *The Bicycle Thief* where the news-quality of the text is accompanied by the use of lesser known actors, with relevant roles reserved for children. Another important characteristic of Neorealist cinema, maintained by Amelio, is the author's determination to depict non-bourgeois characters who are capable of feelings, because the upper class "is the only one which has been legitimized as the depository of the sphere of feelings, which, on the other hand, were considered as a luxury for the lower class" (D'Agostini). The refusal to portray the life of the bourgeoisie translates into Amelio's choice of the dialect inflections in the characters' language. In this movie the director maintains that



he did not derive his idea from Visconti as much as he did in previous works, which were often set in the past: "In *Stolen Children* the point of reference is Rossellini, i.e. somebody who takes his inspiration from reality" (Piccini).

In addition to the references to Rossellini, it is possible to identify other works of Italian Neorealism which enhance the meaning of *Stolen Children* by means of their interaction as implied sub-text. The first is *The Bicycle Thief* by De Sica. The evident similarity of the titles—*Il ladro di bambini*, *Ladri di biciclette*—underlines the analogy between the two main characters, both forced into illegality by the social constraints in which they must live. The development of the relationship between the father and the son is also reminiscent of the affection which grows between Antonio and the children. The restaurant scene in *Stolen Children*, where Antonio treats the children to lunch and lets Luciano drink a little wine, reminds the viewer of the part of De Sica's movie where the father decides to spend the last money he has in a restaurant, so that his child will have a few moments of happiness. Antonio is also the name of the character of the father in *The Bicycle Thief*, who, like the *carabiniere* of Amelio's work, is a non-patriarchal figure. Eventually he is protected by his own child, after the passers-by prevent his attempt to steal the bicycle.

*La ciociara* (*Two Women*), another movie by De Sica, realized in a later phase of Neorealism, depicts a predecessor of the character of the girl. The movie narrates the vicissitudes of a mother and a thirteen-year-old daughter caught in the turmoil of World War II in Central Italy. The daughter is raped by a group of soldiers and becomes the symbol of the condition of dispossessed Italian people during the conflict, and of the violence and humiliation they have to endure. As in the previous movie taken into consideration, the commonality of the name Rosetta, shared by both characters of the young women, permits a deeper interpretation of the violence suffered by the girl in Amelio's movie. It is possible to interpret her as the embodiment of the condition of exploitation imposed on southern Italian people emigrated to the North.

The last film that I would like to discuss in order to shed light on the analysis of *Stolen Children* is *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*), precisely the work by Visconti mentioned by Amelio in the comments I quoted at the beginning of this essay. Visconti describes a family without a father, which emigrates to Milan from the South, and the dissolution of their unity as a result of the contact with the new environment. Amelio's work, on the other hand, describes a process of intellectual growth, which follows a movement in space opposed to the one in *Rocco and His Brothers*, where a symbolic family is reconstituted while the characters move back to their place of origin. We could say that *Stolen Children* represents a continuation of the narrative themes configured in the conclusion of Visconti's movie. In both works, it is the contact with the

metropolis of Milan that induces the dissolution of the family unit. In Visconti's movie the alternative of the land of origin is created *in absentia*, in the words of Rocco, as a place of ancestral purity. His brother Ciro, on the other hand, does not delude himself about the difficulties that a hypothetical return to the South would present for their youngest brother.

Once more it is the similarity of the characters' names which helps to form analogies of meanings between the two works: the youngest brother of the Parondi family is called Luca, etimologically similar to the name of Luciano of *Stolen Children*. The last scenes of the movie by Visconti show Luca walking towards a future destiny where the possibility of a return to the South remains open as the final destination of a forced exile in which he and his family have been involved. The children in Amelio's movie seem to resume the voyage, beginning at the point where Visconti had left Luca in *Rocco and His Brothers*. The Italian South depicted in Amelio's movies corresponds to both Rocco's hopeful expectations and Ciro's disillusionment: it is a place where the fairy-tale and the magic quality of the contact with the sea can coexist with the realist depiction of the environmental disasters of the South. It remains a point of departure where Luciano and Rosetta can re-define their relationship and continue their process of development and growth.<sup>5</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Due to the limited amount of literature published on this movie in English, all the articles that I have consulted are written either in Italian or in French. All the translations of quotes from these languages into English are mine.

<sup>2</sup>As a result of the recent changes in Albania's political climate, a consistent number of Albanian people have tried to reach Italy as undocumented aliens. The migration has been favored by spatial proximity and by decades of misconceptions propagated by the Italian television, which broadcasted across the Adriatic sea the myth of an extraordinarily affluent country. The first groups of refugees were accepted and sheltered, often in the old Albanian communities that had settled in Sicily and Calabria centuries ago. The scarcity of job opportunities in the South has complicated the hope of a thorough involvement of these people in the fabric of Italian society, but, nonetheless, the flow of immigrants continued increasingly. In the summer of 1991 an overcrowded boat carrying approximately 1,000 people left Albania in search of asylum. The occupants were kept for some time in the soccer stadium of Bari and then the Italian government decided that they were to be deported to their own country, probably as a gesture meant to discourage further attempts on the part of the Albanian people.

<sup>3</sup>In a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books* W. V. Harris has published a good overview of the most recent developments in Italian politics.

<sup>4</sup>The movie critic Franco Prono has studied in detail Amelio's previous works, and maintains that the conflict between fathers and children represents a constant narrative theme in the artistic production of the director of *Stolen Children*.

<sup>5</sup>I would like to express my gratitude to the people without whom this article could not have been possible. My friends Carmen Anolfo, Marco Ippolito, and Antonella Panzino have taken time out of their busy schedules to send the majority of the articles quoted in this essay from Sassari, Italy. My brother-in-law and friend Mark Longust has provided insightful commentary on the text. My warmest thanks go to all of them, in friendship. A special "thank you" with love to my wife Bridgett Longust, who has put up patiently with interruptions in her own doctoral work in order to check the quality of my translations from French.

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