

Scavengers for Temporary Freedom and Constructors for Eternal Slavery

A now rather unknown movie from 1969, at the closure of the Italian golden age known as Neo-Realism, is "I Recuperanti" (The Scavengers). The movie, originally conceived for the Italian national TV, rose as a collaboration of two less internationally known neo-realist authors, Ermanno Olmi, the movie maker, and Mario Rigoni Stern, the book writer and war veteran. The authors, leaving like ascetics, yet side by side in the Asiago highland, the theater of one of the most ferocious battles in the former border between Italy and Austria, are rather unusual in this respect, leaving more like Tolstoy, away from the charm and opportunities which Milan, but more particularly the further Rome, might have offered. The authors, taking advantage of the economic miracle which Northern Italy was experiencing at that time, manage to accomplish something most poetical, they manage to rescue a just passed and about to be forgotten aspect of the history of the highland.

Thus, rather than thinking of a pompous movie in which the main subject is the war and then the war again with its big generals, they concentrate on the inhabitants of the highland of Asiago, who, ever since the end of the first world conflict, but also before, with the Austrian occupation when many locals worked as tobacco smugglers, they manage to show a one "art" these locals had developed in order to make a living and avoid immigrating to first America and then Australia. Olmi and Stern narrate here the story of a most amiable young soldier coming back from the Russian front (as Stern himself did), and really wishing to find work and at last, when most discouraged, meeting an hilarious old man, an expert scavenger who starts showing him the dangerous art of scavenging bombs.

What is interesting here is not the formidable and much talked of combination of narrative elements and descriptive ones, in which the viewer is as well instructed with such a rudimentary art coming from an experience dictated by a necessity to survive of which Olmi, who originally made a living making documentaries of industries, is a master. What is most relevant here are the implicit messages we find in the movie. One aspect in particular provides the movie a very "contemporary" profile, that of the "impact of modernity" and how the locals have to constantly struggle and adapt to it.

In the first place, "The Scavengers" depicts an highland brutally transformed by what Marshal McLuhan would properly define a media insertion. The bellic media, in this respect, has brutally inserted himself in all the once beautiful lime mountains which the rain has been carving for thousands of years. The landscape is upside down as well as

the few villages the Alpine soldier encounters walking up to his highland. The people too have changed, dancing America music (which might have shocked our Alpino) and re-marrying at an old age with a young woman (as the Alpino' father who married a girl of the same age as his son). Thus we see both the insertion of not only the technology brought by the German invaders but also that brought by the liberators, the Americans.

Given all these catastrophic premises and having no work, our Alpino and a group of other unemployed locals, resume their own, natural activity of wood cutting and sawing, an initiative that is soon to be brutally blocked by the police, which, in its own right, can be considered also a result of a technology utilized for the sake of control, who uses a telegraph to first sue and then fine the initiator of the activity. What is less under control is the above highland, the highland where the first conflict took place, an highland where a crazy old drunk who lives under the stars and has no job, makes allot more money than anyone else recovering with a metal stick and much intuition old bombs to latter detonate them and sell their "precious" metal.

What we see here is the only possibility offered to the young soldier to make a living, that of "treasure-hunting" with a high level of risk and yet with a guide who has being doing this for decades and he might look mentally hill but is in fact very healthy for his age. The young man introduces technology to the old man, a metal detector he bought with all the money received as a compensation for his years in the military. This technology is a metal-detector to find bigger treasures, a metal detector which the young man perfects (almost like Olmi himself perfecting his own film cameras). Many a treasures are in fact found with always the great, genuine enthusiasm of the old man. However, after an accident where another scavenger dies, right when he could make allot of money, the young man abandon the "company" he had set up with the old man and decides to go for a safe job and thus provide his girlfriend the safety to get marry.

The tragedy here reaches a very interesting turn. The most keen viewer, who had through the movie expected either one of the men or both to die in an explosion, experience a even more dramatic tragedy which reflects the history of being modern as also addressed in Olmi's first exordium "Il Posto". Here the old man cannot transmit such a fine art of survival to the young man he chose as his disciple, an issue which might affect most of modern professions. The young man in fact becomes at one point more of the father of the old man by introducing the metal-detector, a sort of substitute to the natural and well experienced nose and intuition of the old man. The biggest tragedy is however the giving up of freedom, of being able to be under the stars and in the hands of providence, of keeping up a work dictated by survival skills, and joining the

social flock, becoming a carpenter, setting up the cement bricks of a social establishment addressed towards a capitalism that is soon to speculate and ruin more catastrophically the highland once beautiful landscape.

The young soldier used once for fascist purposes, in a violent war of quick resolutions, becomes, after having experienced a short possibility of freedom, he becomes the soldier of another regime, the capitalist regime which, even though more subtly, is there to exploit his own land, constructing houses after houses of cement for tourists, thus implicitly constructing, other than fortifications to expand, forts for invaders to stay and slowly consume the soldier and other locals' nature and this all for the sake of a security which only capitalism can offer and for which men, like those of these highlands, are ready to give up anything, their freedom and nature included. This until the beast of war will reappear in the highland, destroying all such babelic construction and providing still some temporary possibility for the most keen locals to find genial ways to survive, yet another form of scavenging.

It seems however that, as a result of this quick "cementification" boasting the previous generation, the current blossom of the new generation has been doomed to leave, again unable to fully develop their art to survive, or anyway distracted by all the new opportunities that the computer media has brought about. As a result of this more subtle state of war who has dispersed the local youth, the art to survive both morally and intellectually has possibly become that of recreating, by the very medium that has separated the youth from their mother land, to recreate digitally a familiar domain, a substitute for this land, not to disperse. One may ask here if a source of income can be found in such a virtual domain or the process has reversed, no longer wanting locals to get things from their native land out to be sold, but bringing what is out in their virtual domain to recreate such a substituting point of reference, a promised land which becomes metaphysical.