

Terra matta* on the screen: Film in the form of reliquary

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ABSTRACT

The process of adapting a book to create a film has generated an expanding specialist literature on its theory and practice; a substantial toolbox of concepts and tropes to describe the nature of the cross-media shifts is now available to analysts (Stam 2005). The conversion into an acclaimed film of the best-selling autobiography by a Sicilian manual worker and autodidact, Vincenzo Rabito, offers an opportunity to explore further ways of depicting the relationship. Here I examine the treatment of Rabito's original typescript in the film from which it derives and suggest that the metaphor of a reliquary captures to particular effect the intentions of the director, the presentation of the text on the screen and the impact of the film on audiences.

Preamble

In 2000 a picaresque, linguistically idiosyncratic and utterly engrossing 1027-page autobiography, composed on a typewriter some thirty years earlier by Vincenzo Rabito, an autodidact and retired roadmender from Chiaramonte Gulfi in southeast Sicily, was awarded the Premio Pieve by the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (ADN) under the title *Fontanazza*. It was abbreviated into a book published as *Terra matta* by Einaudi in 2007 and then recreated as a film, *Terramatta; Il Novecento italiano di Vincenzo Rabito analfabeta siciliano* (hereafter *Terramatta*;), presented at the Venice film festival in 2012. Three other versions of Rabito's life exist: a revision of *Fontanazza* by his son Giovanni which eliminated most of the spelling and punctuation obstacles to its understanding; a critical edition of the original text prepared by the ADN's archivist Luca Ricci; and a second autobiography by Rabito himself, who rewrote his entire life from 1899 up to his death in 1981. Some of the significant shifts in form and content across these versions have already been tracked in detail

(Moss 2014). Here, drawing on Costanza Quatriglio's accounts of her work as director of *Terramatta*; and the organisation of its images on the screen, I shall examine the neglected relation between Rabito's original typescript and the film.¹

Terramatta; as a reliquary

How can the relation between *Terramatta*; and its literary progenitors best be described? To call the film simply an ‘adaptation’ of Rabito’s typescript or its published version *Terra matta*, however that process is characterised, is neither informative nor how its makers understood their work. To define it as a ‘cross-media sequel’ to Rabito’s texts might seem more promising since sequels offer incoming directors the chance to address in some way, explicitly or implicitly, the questions raised in the work of their predecessors (Mulhall 2008). But, except for a single fleeting visual reference (35:54 - 36:05) to the typescript’s conversion into the book which first attracted Quatriglio’s interest, *Terra matta*; does not reflect on its own history or submit any of the contents of either the original or the published version to critical analysis.² Rather than examine the applicability of further types of sequential relation, therefore, I shall instead advance the case for treating the film as a contemporary form of reliquary created to preserve and exhibit that especially intimate relic of a man’s life which is his autobiography.

The metaphorical description of films as containers is commonplace – they are often described as ‘vehicles’ for their stars or exotic locations – but comparing a film to a very particular container-item from antique religious repertoires might at first sight seem to stretch that metaphor to breaking-point. ‘Relic’ – a “slippery, elastic and expansive (...) concept and category” (Walsham 2010: 11) – is certainly in contemporary use to name items which once belonged to celebrities:

The bidders [at the auction of Elizabeth David’s house contents] had not bought pots and wooden spoons but relics: fragments from someone they had never met but who had had such an effect on their lives that they wanted to keep a little piece of her forever (Cooper 1999: xii).

Since ‘reliquary’ does not have a similarly familiar secular application, we need a brief summary of its key features. Reliquaries contain the remains, possessions or contact relics of saints and come in many forms. They are often made from precious metals or materials, ornamented with jewels, designed as eye-catching objects for public display rather than as simple utilitarian containers. The particular type of reliquary relevant here is the ‘body-part reliquary’ in which the shape of the receptacle mirrors the part of the body or shape of the contact-relic it houses and thus blurs the apparently firm boundary between container and contained. Since the relic itself can be seen only on particular days or in glimpses through a crystal or glass window let into the side of its container, the container itself – often materially valuable in its own right – takes on some of the sacred powers attributed to its largely hidden contents. The German term for this class of reliquaries, ‘speaking reliquaries’ (*redende*

¹ The focus on the director and the relation of *Terramatta*; to her previous work means having to set aside for the purposes of the present discussion the contribution of her co-screenwriter and producer, Chiara Ottaviano, to the making of the film. She has described her own role and her public-history ambitions for the film elsewhere (Ottaviano 2014).

² Reference to images will identify their location in minute:second form on the DVD version released in 2012 by Cliomedia Officina and Luce Cinecittà, LD97009.

reliquiare), is especially apt to characterise a film such as *Terramatta*; in which a narrating voice has a central role.³

Both reliquaries and films are objects which belong to the genre that the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1999: 163) called “technologies of enchantment”, aesthetic creations imbued with different kinds of magic to procure the attention and assent of their audiences. Both are durable and portable and can therefore enjoy long-lasting and wide-ranging appreciation; and both benefit from the organisation and ambience of the places where they are typically exhibited – churches and cinemas – to engage their viewers in their contents and guide them towards the intended kinds of emotive and cognitive response. As Hahn (2010: 291) points out, reliquaries essentially mediate between relics and their audiences, both professional and lay. They protect the relic which makes visible to the faithful the invisible dimensions of religious power and authority; and they convey by the symbols and narratives in their often very elaborate decoration the proper ways in which their viewers are to be inspired and instructed. The images from which *Terramatta*; is constructed have a similar function, furnishing a powerful aesthetic setting for the film’s primary object of attention and attracting the audience necessary for its appreciation. Although the filmmakers give no sign of having had the idea of a reliquary in mind, the analogy nonetheless captures their ambitions for the film and the organisation of its content as well as helping us to understand a key source of its power to captivate spectators and critics alike.

Portrait of a text

Quatriglio emphasises that her focus is on Rabito’s text rather than Rabito himself and that her aim is to arouse in her audience the same sense of wonder at it that she herself felt (Puglisi 2013: 76-7; Luciano and Scarparo 2014: 285).⁴ In the context of his background and times, the course of his life was not especially unusual so the priority she gives to the altogether extraordinary autobiography he produced is not surprising. The text does indeed dominate the film both aurally and visually: the spoken soundtrack consists largely of extracts read from the book, and we are repeatedly drawn back to images of the pages of the typescript, first in close-up to highlight particular words, then superimposed on other images, drifting across a background of buildings or countryside in magic realist style; at one point (28:55-29:38) the lines accelerate across the screen like railway carriages to accompany the sound of the train taking Rabito to Germany in 1940, seeming to suggest that the text is a faithful unmediated reproduction of the events it is narrating. The close focus on the printed detail of single words and the pitted pages caused by the heavy-handed use of the typewriter conveys the individuality of the composition by a novice-user as effectively as if it had been handwritten. As Quatriglio says, “The true key to making the film (...) was the materiality of the writing” (Luciano and Scarparo 2014: 287). Almost three-dimensional at one moment, diaphanous the next, apparently moving miraculously of its own volition and animated throughout by the voice of its narrator, the text becomes as expressive as any human protagonist.

³ “Perhaps most striking to the modern mind (...) is the claim that relics (and reliquaries) had the ability to speak. Innumerable miracle stories relate accounts of saints speaking through their relics to devotees (...)” (Hahn 2012: 28). For analyses of the role of relics in societies from ancient Egypt to modern China, see the contributions to Walsham (2010).

⁴ Compare “Wonder is by no means the least of these effects that are induced by the strange and beautiful spectacle of relics and reliquaries; indeed it is the key transformative response, which vis-à-vis relics suddenly recognizes divine presence in mundane objects and allows them to possess their striking power” (Hahn 2012: 8).

Appropriately we learn about it before we come to know anything of its author. The film opens with the statement that the semi-literate Vincenzo Rabito wrote an extraordinarily long autobiography which was awarded the Pieve Prize and published by one of Italy's premier publishers. That information is accompanied by the sound of hesitant and irregular typing, identifiable as such once we see a sequence of primitive ring-bound folders, followed by a shot of one of their pages with the word *terramatta* in close-up and then the view of the plaque put up by the town council to honour him as a writer. But although we get an idea of the author's character from the narrator's brilliantly evocative and nuanced reading of extracts from the text, we only get our first glimpse of him close to the end, captured briefly on a family video and again in the concluding sequence focusing on the photograph on his tomb. The focus on the word 'writer' sculpted there offers a closing counterpoint to the opening shot of the same word on the commemorative plaque beside his birthplace, underlining once more that the film's concern is Rabito's astonishing representation of his life rather than the life he actually lived.

In *Terramatta*; Quatriglio makes use of many of the techniques employed in her earlier work: the division of the content into 'acts' and 'chapters', the invisibility of the protagonist who is present only as the narrator, the juxtapositions of present and past, the use of the life-as-a-journey trope, the symbols of travel (Luciano and Scarparo 2011). The film is thus divided into a sequence of sixteen 'chapters', initially separated by the insertion of silent-film-style titles using close-ups on words in the text and thereafter by images of movement along roads or railway tracks or water which signify the transitions between the key moments in Rabito's life. Archival clips and photos in black and white taken between 1915 and 1968 amount to about 40 per cent of the film; the remainder consists of contemporary shots in colour of people and places which are often interleaved with the historical images. To underscore the dramatic literary form which she has given to the film, Quatriglio inserts a brief extract showing the paladins at battle in the puppet theatre, *Opra de' Pupi*, a story-telling form of late nineteenth-century Sicilian popular culture with which Rabito was familiar and which he seems to have drawn on to picture his own struggles. The very disparate elements and the shifting interpretive focus are held together by the flow of the narrator's voice and the recurrent images of the text, a kind of equivalent to the spiral binding of the folders of pages we see at the beginning, the film thus self-consciously embedding its central object in a literary format – a film not only about a book but itself cast in book form.

Purification and mystery

One function of reliquaries is to ennable their relics by detaching them from their origins, relocating them outside time, and endowing them with a mystery which compels attention. *Terramatta*; purifies its text-relic in two ways. First, the text is detached from both its author and its origins. We do not see an image of Vincenzo Rabito himself until close to the film's end; the extracts are read by an invisible narrator who is not the author. We are not told why a poorly educated manual worker should have taken the very unusual step of writing an autobiography at all, let alone on such a scale, and therefore what his real connection to it might be. As he in fact acknowledged, the reason for writing down his life was to purge himself of all the bile stored up against his (long-dead) mother-in-law whom he regarded as his lifelong unjustified persecutor (2007: 225); and it is thus full of lengthy diatribes against her and her kin. Yet the film makes no mention of her – an erasure analogous to the suppression of the fact of death and the exercise of unjust lay power necessary for the creation of a relic (Brown 1981: 74-79, 101). We hear a single obscure reference to his complicated and unhappy family situation – the remark that his wedding day was the worst in

his life (28:25) – but its meaning is incomprehensible to anyone who does not already know the story. Second, the text's history after the Pieve prize has also been expunged. As mentioned above, the greatly abbreviated and skilfully edited version published by Einaudi – the only version that viewers might have seen – is shown once for a few seconds without commentary. The film thus strips out the marks of any other hands than Rabito's own, including the route by which the director herself was led to his original typescript. This comprehensive purification, erasing the text's real history, gives it a timelessness which sets it, as I shall suggest below, against the time-bound forms of representation of the past which surround it in the film.

The mysteriously timeless dimension the text inhabits is enhanced in further ways which illustrate Quatriglio's assertion that “[d]isorientation and doubt are essential [to documentaries]” (Summerfield 2013: 267). The film starts conventionally enough at the author's birthplace and proceeds broadly chronologically through the stages of his life. But within each of those stages the film's storyline is broken up and made generally complicated and in places obscure. For example: images from the past and present are suddenly juxtaposed on the screen in the middle of the recounting of a single episode (13:40-14.10; 35:33); the flow of the story is interrupted by shots of a bare unchanging landscape; the passage of an unidentified train bedecked with flowers attracts the presence of unusually large crowds paying their silent respects (17:36); sequences from other films (e.g., Ugo Saitta's *I pupi siciliani*, 1955) or newsreels are inserted, with audiences watching them (25:04); a man searches the typescript for something not disclosed (31:54-32:33); dates which the author describes as impossible to forget are mentioned without clarification (28:21; 32:49). Mostly it is not clear whether we are watching the real people mentioned by the narrator or actors playing them. The musical soundtrack, designed to convey the text's universal message by excluding any reference to identifiable Sicilian folk themes, provides its own disorienting contribution, abruptly juxtaposing church bells, a snatch from a pop song and electronic music (Lombardo 2012: 24).

A mystery of particular importance is created at the outset. We have just been shown the plaque commemorating Vincenzo Rabito as a ‘writer’ when we hear him describing himself as completely illiterate (*inababeto*) – repeating the term in the film's title and in its opening description of the author – and we then see the word *inababeto* in close-up in his typescript. The image of that page confronts the viewer with features that diverge from almost every norm and form of standard writing, especially writing credited with literary value, and would normally render any work almost worthless. Like the bone or dust of a relic, something conventionally regarded as intrinsically meaningless or ugly has apparently been magically transformed into an object of extraordinary value. Furthermore, that viewer must surely wonder how an author who has just admitted to being entirely illiterate could not only write an autobiography on the scale we have just been alerted to but also choose to employ the unfamiliar instrument of a typewriter to do so. The process is made to appear incomprehensible; and the perplexity only deepens as the apparent poverty of the author's life and cultural resources is revealed. Not until the final sequence when the narrator reveals how as a boy he learned to write is one small part of the mystery dissolved. But the reasons why he should have used his painfully-acquired literacy to compose a one-thousand-page autobiography and the identity of the readers he imagined himself addressing are never presented. The reception of *Terramatta*; in fact provides a good illustration of Alfred Gell's suggestion that whatever awe and fascination artworks of any virtuosity generate derives in part from the spectator's inability to grasp how their creators could possibly have produced such an object (1998: 68-72).

The past in the present

Quatriglio says that her films are concerned with “unveiling rather than demonstrating” (*cit.* in Summerfield 2013: 266) and with making visible what is mostly invisible – the lives of ordinary folk, the private lives of celebrities, personal dilemmas or life’s complexities.⁵ Since they are designed to “create a plot out of questions (...) and offer the spectator a moment for reflection” (*cit.* in Luciano and Scarparo 2013), there is little to be gained from searching them for assertions of dogmas or truths. In spite of the second part of its title, *Terramatta*; does not promote a particular view of the history of twentieth-century Italy, uncover new facts or raise doubts about established interpretations. Nor does it take the side of an underdog to contest official views even though there are moments, notably in the wartime and colonial sequences, when the views from above and below are in evident contrast. The accuracy of Rabito’s own account is not itself questioned even though much of it consists of recalling events up to fifty years earlier and Giovanni Rabito has illustrated his father’s capacity for straightforward invention (Moss 2014: 309-310). Instead, as in Quatriglio’s other films in which the protagonists lead uprooted or tangled lives, it invites spectators to reflect on the relations between past and present, both individual and collective.

As an autobiography, a universal example of “thought about the past” (Davis 1992: 17), Rabito’s text belongs to a genre which has a special status in discussions of memory and history. Showing the contents of the past – the wars, emigration, politics, work and family life which Rabito, ‘piccolo ma pieno di coraggio’ (2:50), had to tackle – is of course necessary to appreciate the point of view his experiences created for him; and Quatriglio uses Rabito’s story as an act of remembrance to connect contemporary audiences to historical events that have largely slipped beyond their knowledge. But the film is at least as interested in drawing attention to the other forms in which those events, individual or collective, are recorded. This concern is signalled from the outset when the sound of Rabito’s typing, then the most advanced writing technology for preserving thought, precedes even the view of the text itself. Thereafter we are shown, in chronological sequence, examples of the principal technologies used to preserve the past: silent films from the First World War which present the soldiers as mute victims of mass slaughter; the radio broadcasts of Mussolini and his regime’s news with their bombastic and mendacious triumphalism; the puppet-show which keeps the stories of the Carolingian paladins alive; the television sets which as local novelties endow their owners with a certain prestige; and the Super 8 film on which Rabito is captured at a family party. These technologies are not ranked in terms of their relative capacities for accuracy or coverage. Rather, they are shown as firmly embedded in different historical, political and social contexts, both public and domestic; and their use emphasises in turn the historicity of the events they are depicting.

A similarly relativist approach marks the film’s illustrations, created by different sequences of juxtaposed images, of three kinds of relation between past and present. The first portrays the present as repeating the past: we see adjacent clips of children from different generations playing similar games in public squares, and Rabito’s account of telling his stories to an appreciative wartime audience in a home-made shelter is immediately followed by shots of contemporary girls listening to something off-screen with equal attention. In the second case the present is shown as coexisting side by side with the past. Shots of a Fascist-style building and a recording of a speech by Mussolini accompany the movement of a vehicle along a contemporary highway. From a different standpoint, this same relation is suggested by the contemporary memories of Rabito and his writing offered by his sons, other family members and occasional bystanders, which dominate the later part of the film and

⁵ This interest is highlighted in Scarparo and Luciano 2013; Luciano and Scarparo 2014.

illustrate the social relations for the oral transmission of the past. In the third case, the present is shown as radically different from the past. A picture of an impoverished Gorizia half-destroyed by war is followed by the scene of a modern city street with young people on motorbikes, the flow of traffic and the noise of prosperity. The shots of rural poverty in the Sicily of the 1950s give way to contemporary images of a very much more prosperous recent time; a picture of the river Isonzo in wartime remembered as terrifyingly choked with corpses is followed by a view of its tranquil flow through the countryside when Rabito revisits it half a century later. He emphasises himself the differences between the hardships that he had had to endure and the ‘*bella ebica*’ (wonderful times) that his sons’ generation enjoy. Those ways of representing the relations between present and past provide an aesthetic setting against which the centre of the film’s attention can stand out by contrast. For the portrayal and narration of Rabito’s text bind seamlessly together different historical moments: the time when the events described took place; the time, many years later, when the author wrote them down; and the time of their narration in the film some thirty years later still. The effect is to reinforce the universal, transcendent status of the autobiography.

Displaying the text

Rabito’s typescript is stored at the ADN in Pieve Santo Stefano where it was deposited by his son Giovanni and received the Pieve Prize. The film includes an extract from the Prize citation declaring the autobiography a masterpiece, albeit one that will never be read in its original form (19:20). But not only is it a masterpiece that no one will read, but the out-of-the-way location of the ADN and the need to protect the text also ensure that it will rarely even be viewed, except on the infrequent ceremonial occasions when it is unveiled. Illustrating Quatriglio’s interest in using film to make the invisible visible, *Terramatta*; therefore offers at least a sight of Rabito’s pages that would otherwise remain effectively inaccessible, revealing the pronounced individuality of their content – the absence of paragraph and sentence breaks, lack of capital letters and accents, and eccentric use of punctuation – which was eliminated in the published edition. To that extent the film therefore restores to the author and to spectators the work in its original form.

However immobile in their churches reliquaries and relics may appear today, their history often reveals their passage into different hands through sale, gift or theft, enabling their powers to be appreciated by a wide range of communities (Brown 1981: 88-95). Apart from private viewing through its reproduction on DVD, the distribution of *Terramatta*; has enabled it to exhibit Rabito’s text around two different public circuits. The first is Italy’s *circa* 130 regular film festivals, sacralising occasions on which experts assess the entries for awards rather as ecclesiastical and lay authorities convened to pronounce on the status of candidate relics (177).⁶ The literary critics, historians and anthropologists who made up the jury for the Pieve Prize had already certified the original text as an authentic work of literature. The four festival awards that the film has received have not only reinforced that first appraisal but also serve to identify further dimensions of its value. Thus the inaugural *Civitas Vitae* award at the 2012 Venice Film Festival for the contribution to appreciation of the lessons the old can teach the young was followed in the same year by the *Efebo d’argento* for a film adapted from a work of literature. The *SNCCI: Nastro d’argento al miglior documentario* recognised its importance as documentary, as did the conferral of first prize in the documentary section of the 5th Festival of Italian Cinema in Madrid. Exhibition in

⁶ To this number, taken from the Festival Focus register, should be added several one-off or short-lived festivals each year. Most festivals are dedicated to a specific genre or theme: the best-known have a documentary section in which *Terramatta*; could compete.

festivals elsewhere in Europe and the Americas has followed. Selection for entry into such competitions provides the film with an additional aura derived from being chosen to represent a genre (the documentary today, the power of the relation between memory and history) or a category (e.g., young Italian film directors, women's cinema, contemporary Italian cinema), just as the contents of a reliquary point not only to the travails of a particular saint but also to the general themes of religious suffering and belief.

Unlike the community of the faithful which already exists for displays of religious relics, in order to appreciate *Terramatta*; the audiences have to be created *ex novo*. However, since the film's distributor, the Istituto Luce, is one of Italy's smallest, accounting for just 0.1% of national cinema takings, this second distribution circuit has to be largely created by word of mouth and grassroots initiatives, helped by the publicity of its festival showings, awards and reviews. Town councils have used it on official occasions; academics have shown it to their history and film classes; and members of film clubs, cultural associations and small independent cinemas have organised showings. Since September 2012 *Terramatta*; has had some 70 viewings of this kind around Italy, each with an audience averaging between 100 and 150 spectators.⁷ Their socio-political profile has been very mixed: at one end, a socially exclusive Inner Wheel Rotary Club where *Terramatta*; provided an occasion to raise money for charity; at the other, centres for radical political and cultural activism. We can guess that the responses to the film must have been as varied as the reasons behind them. But we should also note that the film itself incorporates a series of reflexive prompts which resemble in their didactic function the religious episodes or figures depicted on many reliquaries. We are shown audiences watching films, newsreels, a puppet show and other events with the same enthusiastic engagement that Quatriglio intended the audiences of *Terramatta*; to experience (Luciano and Scarparo 2014: 285); their collective effect is to create an 'observation position' for the viewer. At several showings the participation of the director or producer in discussions afterwards has provided further authoritative guidance on how the film should be interpreted.

Conclusion

Prospective viewers who note the film's full title and description as a documentary but do not know the texts on which it drew will surely take the title phrase *Terramatta* ('madlands') to refer to Italy and anticipate a refraction of its twentieth-century history through the experiences of an illiterate Sicilian called Vincenzo Rabito. But, as we have seen, what they are in fact presented with is something very different. The film is not intended as a summary of a century of Italian history through the life of citizen Rabito nor as a rounded and faithful treatment of the life that he actually lived. What they encounter, instead, is the transfiguration of the text which is the author's most enduring relic; its elements preserved in digital form for revelation in one of the sacred sites of modern culture. Although churches and cinemas support different, rarely overlapping, spheres of value, they share features which encourage individual and collective meditation on the content of what they display. And although the material form that *Terramatta*; takes does not resemble a reliquary for the remains of a holy figure, it provides a similarly elaborate setting to evoke the sense of wonder at Rabito's achievement that the director intended.

* I am very grateful for help from Chiara Ottaviano and Susanna Scarparo.

⁷ In 2014 it was also shown on television (RAI 5) and at the commemoration of the First World War at the Vittoriano in Rome.

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