

***Asmarina*, Alan Maglio and Medhin Paolos (2015), Italy: Alan Maglio and Medhin Paolos, in collaboration with Docucity – Documenting the City**

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A magnifying glass hovering over some old slides that depict mementoes of family gatherings, pictures displayed on a cell phone, other photographs selected from a box where more memories are collected open *Asmarina* (Maglio and Paolos, 2015). From the very start, the documentary directed by Alan Maglio and Medhin Paolos foregrounds the importance of images and personal memories in a process of research that is central to the structure of the film. Just like the magnifying glass, the filmmakers invite the audience to look at the pictures, going beyond the surface in the attempt to reveal pieces of history that official narratives have made opaque during the years.

Such a focus on the photographic as a means of research is not casual. Both Maglio and Paolos share a background in photography and a common interest in archives explored in previous collaborations, as the exhibition *Corpi Migranti* ('Migrant Bodies') at Museo Africano in Verona in 2010. This search through institutional archives, often neglected themselves by the most, resulted in a personal need to interrogate the absences in these collections and refocus on those 'silences that pervade history'.<sup>12</sup> The lived experience of both filmmakers in the Porta Venezia neighbourhood in central Milan further informs the film. This is a place where the Eritrean-Ethiopian community has settled since the 1970s and where various migrant

groups now mingle daily with older generations of Milanese, the LGBTQ community and young people attracted by the lively nightlife that the area offers.

*Asmarina* emerges at the confluence of these encounters, tracing the connection between Italian colonialism in Eritrea and Ethiopia, the history of the diasporic community situated in Porta Venezia, and contemporary migrations through the interviewees as oral storytellers. Since its debut at the Festival of African, Asian and Latin American Cinema in Milan in 2015, the film has travelled across Italy, Europe and the United States, with screenings in festivals and universities, where it has been received with enthusiasm (De Franceschi 2015, Davis 2016, Hawthorne 2016).

The encounter – at times serendipitous, others sought out – is central to the film. In one of the first scenes, Maglio interacts with a group of men outside a café in Porta Venezia, in dialogue with Michele Lettenze, one of the main interviewees throughout the film who is defined as a ‘our archive’ by the others. In other scenes, Paolos sits listening to people recollecting their past or is caught on camera while filming. Their presence, and by extension that of the camera, is necessary to the evocation of memories; the documentary itself emerges through this lived and symbolic encounter and the participation of the filmmakers as subjects in this community. Some of the most interesting testimonies have resulted from a chance meeting, as in the case of writer Erminia Dell’Oro. As she was visiting Asli Haddas, the owner of Gogol'Ostello who was being interviewed, she sat down and ‘literally put her experience on the table, that of the daughter of someone who went to Eritrea, who was born there as an Italian but has always had

such a strong connection with a country that she feels her own'; or Elena Woldegabriel who, while at her parents', started to poignantly talk on camera about the right to citizenship and her experience as a daughter of migrants that Paolos feels analogous to her own.<sup>3</sup>

The editing also emphasizes this encounter by intercutting between interviewees recounting their similar yet distinct stories, giving equal importance to different perspectives at once. Different generations, spaces and (hi)stories thus coalesce in the film, which finds its strength in this polyphonic and open narrative that exposes the legacies of colonialism and challenges a conventional conceptualization of 'Italianness'.

The repression of Italian colonialism in institutional discourses after the process of decolonization is best exemplified by one of the first interviews, with Franco De' Molinari from the local branch of A.N.R.R.A. – Associazione Nazionale Reduci e Rimpatriati d'Africa ('National Association of Veterans and Repatriated from Africa') who perpetuates the myth of *italiani brava gente* ('Italians good people') (Del Boca 2009): colonialism is justified by De' Molinari as a civilizing mission, an exploration of uncharted lands not unlike what other European countries did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, omitting the most violent aspects of the imperialist project. His account is punctuated with the apparatus of official history: precise dates and places of battles and key historical events, as maps appear on screen and trophies and insignia surround him in his office.

This is juxtaposed with the reflection made by Elena. Looking directly at the camera, she urgently articulates a different perspective on colonialism, demonstrating that such a disavowal does not extend to personal memories

(Fuller 2011). She emphasizes that, due to their shared history, neither Italy nor Eritrea would exist as they are without the other; and yet, while descendants from Italian colonists are perfectly integrated in Eritrea and considered citizens, second generations are still regarded as the Other to distrust in Italy. While the filmmakers give space to divergent perspectives, it is through personal memories that the impact of colonialism on the material lives of people past and present clearly emerges.

The memory mediated through images is central in the second part of the documentary as well. As the filmmakers continue to interrogate what constitutes an archive, they explore the *Habesha* community in Milan,<sup>4</sup> taking the 1985 photographic book *Stranieri a Milano* ('Foreigners in Milan') by Lalla Golderer and Vito Scifo as a springboard for their discussion. The interview with the photographers is intercut with their pictures and, in turn, with the people who are portrayed or witnessed the events illustrated in them. The Congress of Bologna, where Eritreans from all over Europe gathered each year for a month and a half between 1974 and 1991, represents a key moment in the history of the diasporic community and a link between the colonial past and the present through the fight for independence in the geopolitical reshaping of the Horn of Africa. The legacy of colonialism is cogently revealed through a lengthy interview with Tsegehans Weldeslassie, who had to flee Eritrea due to the Afwerki regime. As he highlights, while Italians are often disinformed on the causes of current global migrations, the present political context in Eritrea is a consequence of the colonial past, with repercussions on the Milanese *Habesha* community, now split according to political positions.

The documentary however does not hide the liability to error and subjectivity of personal memories. Paolos has affirmed that it was not their intention to make a history film, rather to highlight that ‘there are far too many people who have been forgotten by history because no one took the trouble to officially register what they did or their impact on a historical process’ (2020). Indeed, even when not precise, retold memories become part of a process of reappropriation of cultural signs as well as of a traumatic collective past that brings forth a new identity, that of the diasporic community in-between Milan and Asmara. ‘Asmarina’ itself offers an example of this: many interviewees mis-recognize it as a typical fascist song, due to its melody and lyrics, while it was composed in the 1950s. Its further sub-version when sung in Tigrinya by Wedi Shawl replaces the object of love from an Asmarina woman onto the city itself, expressing the nostalgia for home in a process of displacement.

This finds a parallel not only in the use of tracks by Clap! Clap! (Cristiano Crisci), who mixes contemporary electronic and folk African sonorities, but also in the Milanese-accented translation of a traditional Eritrean song by DJ Milly, one of the key figures in the community and in the city’s Black Music scene. As Milly and the filmmakers get to the location of an impromptu DJ set to bring relief to some of the newly-arrived migrants towards the end of the film, the music pervades the streets of Porta Venezia, symbolically appropriating and re-signifying the city through a diasporic experience that is specifically localized, in a mix that ‘is lived and felt in Porta Venezia every day’.<sup>5</sup> The images of the shops, eateries and streets in the neighbourhood punctuate the film in establishing shots that

not only help to situate where the interviews are taking place, but also give a sense of how the *Habesha* community has reshaped the urban landscape.

This postcolonial resignification of the city through lived experience can be compared to the reappropriation by the Eritreans of Italian colonial architecture in Asmara as a means to overcome the traumatic past and spur the independent project at once (Fuller 2011) or to the postcolonial traces revealed in monuments and buildings in Rome in the photographic book *Roma negata* by Igiaba Scego and Rino Bianchi (2014). In the latter, as Scego's writing remaps the city through the wanderings of a postcolonial flâneuse who brings back to light the erased colonial past that marks specific spaces, the photos by Bianchi position postcolonial subjects in front of these 'landmarks' to visually expose the link between past and present, Horn of Africa and Rome. Likewise, the community seen dancing in the streets to DJ Milly's music in the final moments of the documentary make past and present as well as different locales coalesce *here* and *now*.

The storytelling continues over the credits of *Asmarina*: Michele finally sings the song that he has been evoking since the first sequence of the film; DJ Milly proudly declares that he drives like a Milanese; Asli and her mother remember flying Ethiopia Airlines in the 1980s; Medhin, Helen and other friends are seen in a convivial moment while waiting for the metro; family photos continue to be intercut with the credits. The story is left open-ended to encourage the audience to continue the conversation and the exploration of the past. While the official history has erased many stories, by foregrounding this 'alternative narrative' Maglio and Paolos effectively

make those silences in history resonate in the present, demonstrating the necessity to rethink what 'Italian' means.

### References

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Medhin Paolos for the information provided in our conversation. Eleonora Sammartino, Skype interview with Medhin Paolos, 20 January 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original (Italian) are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Eleonora Sammartino, Skype interview with Medhin Paolos, 20 January 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Habesha* is an inclusive term Eritrean and Ethiopian people use to refer to themselves, emphasizing their commonalities rather than differences as stated by various interviewees throughout the film.

<sup>5</sup> Eleonora Sammartino, Skype interview with Medhin Paolos, 20 January 2020.