

## Oona's Enchantment

Artists have been in thrall to the cinema since the *poemes cinematographic* of Apollinaire and Philippe Soupault, and since Louis Aragon first recognised a 'new, audacious aesthetic'<sup>1</sup> in the slapstick shorts of Sennett and Chaplin which entered Paris picture-houses following WW1. The brash exoticism of this populist cinema, and the dream worlds of modernity it evoked, became a muse for poets and painters, and in the 'synthetic criticism' of Aragon and others, gives us the first intimations of film criticism. It is notable that, in comparison to these first giddy outpourings on page and canvas, artists were rarely drawn to the medium of film itself. This relative paucity (with some exceptions in Rene Clair's 1924 *Entr'act*, *Ballet Mecanique* [Ferdinand Leger, 1925], and *Un Chien Andalou* [Dali, Bunuel, 1929]) cannot only be attributed to the difficulty of accessing film's apparatus and materials. It suggests, I think, a desire to reflect upon the phenomenon of cinema - as image and experience - without necessarily wishing to engage in its systems of production. Thus, Dada or Surrealism's cinematic enchantment exists at one remove, to be made sense of through other art mediums. We see this later, at the other end of the century, where artists such as Douglas Gordon and Matthias Muller, equally giddy with a rediscovery of Hollywood through the take-home culture of the VHS, replay Hollywood as video art for the gallery. On the cusp of a new century and at celluloid's endgame, their enchantment is now tinged with an archival melancholy, so that Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* might be seen as a paen to cinema as a reflection of modernity in passing.

Oona Grimes seems to instinctively embody this complex play of enchantment and re-enchantment in her recent series of short films *Hail The New Etruscan*, made whilst on her 2018 Bridget Riley residency at the British School in Rome. She might also be understood as an inheritor of the cinephilia precipitated by Apollinaire, Aragon and their ilk through the pages of *Le Film*. Like them, she absorbs her enduring love of cinema into other art forms, particularly drawing, print-making and in clay. But whilst her film series might be seen as a new departure from a practice predominantly paper and material based, this in no way suggests that Grimes' melancholy and enigmatic performances to camera on Roman streets, replaying the gestures of characters from films by Federico Fellini (*Oscar's Dance*) or Vittorio de Sica (*Mozzarella in Carrozza*), will supersede her work in other forms. Instead this series of short films might be seen as part of the wider constellation of different ways in which Grimes approached her residency in Rome, where references to Italian cinema surfaced through other media alongside them.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Aragon (1918) 'On Decor', in Hammond, Paul, (1978) *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writing on the Cinema*, 59, Polygon: Edinburgh (2nd Ed 1991).

Rather than providing her with a new medium, the films of the Neorealist movement, which she had always loved, might be more rightly understood as a mode of creative and affective navigation through Rome, where the fictional spaces of its cinema become another resonant layer of history embedded in the city streets and architecture. Neorealism portrayed Rome's shadow side, locating its stories in the shanty towns and half built suburbs that characterised the margins of a city half destroyed by war and occupation, instead of the grand buildings of its Roman and Renaissance glory. In films such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accatone* and *Hawks and Sparrows (Uccellacci e Uccellini, 1965)*, Federico Fellini's *La Strada* and *La Dolce Vita*, and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves (1948)* and *Umberto D (1952)*, its protagonists negotiate maze-like streets, crumbling buildings and the detritus of bombsites and rubbish tips, in narratives desperate with poverty and struggle. Grimes searches out this less forgiving image of Rome by returning to the sites where these dramas were staged, seeking to understand the city through her singular embodiment of significant scenes from its cinema. She writes of how, tracing the paths through the city of these fictional protagonists, 'those walks and those films wove themselves into my dreams and my drawings.'

Well known for their attempts to create a cinema true to the political and social upheavals taking place in Italy following WW11, directors associated to the Neorealist movement, such as de Sica and Fellini, created what Andre Bazin called at the time, 'an aesthetic of reality',<sup>2</sup> which melded documentary means to realist narratives, to give voice to the realities and struggles of the working class and the poor. Significantly for Grimes, one of the strictures in Neo-realism's creed of authenticity was the use of non-professional actors, whose everyday dramas were shot on location in the streets and districts of the city where their real life counterparts might live. By assuming the roles of protagonists within the films, Grimes can time travel back to the cultural and political spaces that both character and film-maker inhabit during this sensitive period of post war development in Italy. It is an attempt, by putting herself in their place, to understand Italian culture experientially by straddling its fact and fiction: literally looking close to the ground, rather than from the lofty position offered by historical perspectives. And, in this way, the viewer of both films and drawings witnesses her intense engagement with the atmospheres of the city, where cinematic evocations mingle with other cultural and contemporary presences, in the traces of Etruscan culture (hence the title of her series) which she encounters, or the birdsong which follows her on her walks around

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<sup>2</sup> See Bazin, Andre, (1948) 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism (Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation), *What is Cinema? Volume 11*, University of California Press: London, 1972

the city, and has become a strong feature of the resulting works on film and on paper, seen at The Bower.

Grimes' enduring love of cinema generally, and the work of these directors particularly, also explains why these films became a principle entry point to her engagement with the city during her residency, and assumed as much significance as other cultural forms and historic contexts in the body of works which ensued. Emerging from Europe during and immediately following WW11, Neorealism's potent combination of political engagement with affective and humanist story telling was instrumental in the development of a discursive, high culture, film spectatorship – or cinephilia – reflected in journals, film festivals and subsidised national film production and exhibition. Quantified as one of the first movements in what were seen as a series of national 'waves' of buoyant and challenging film form emerging from France to Czechoslovakia and Poland, Neorealism was a touchstone for the art house cinema culture of the post war period in London, where Grimes first encountered it at cinemas such as Portobello Road's Electric in the 1970s and 80s. Her carefully calibrated embodiments of key moments in Neorealist cinema could be seen as manifestations of what Christian Keathley identifies as 'the cinephiliac moment'.<sup>13</sup> Here Keathley is referring to extraneous details in film scenes, which exist aside from its narrative momentum yet are highly significant to the cinephile's experience and memories of the film. He explains it as 'a *mise-en-abyme* wherein each cinephile's obsessive relationship to the cinema is embodied in its most dense and concentrated form,<sup>14</sup> to be found in the minutiae of performance and prop: from the colour of Cary Grant's socks in *North by Northwest*, to, according to Manny Farber's note, how Humphrey Bogart looks up at a street sign as he crosses the street in "no longer than a blink."<sup>15</sup> With this in mind, *Hail the New Etruscan* might be read as the embodiment of Grimes' own cinephiliac moments. Enhanced by their looping brevity, each performance to camera offered a means for her to replay the pleasure she has found in the fabric of favoured films, accrued across a life of cinema-going. But unlike Farber and Keathley, her cinephiliac reverie was elicited through a physical encounter in space, as she returns to the locations of Neorealism, making concrete the dematerialised pleasures of re-watching and re-imagining. More than just an embodiment of her own cinephilia, the past evocations of the city, which Grimes' act of contemporary haunting conjures, are also a potent means of drawing out historical resonances. Curious tourists outside the Pantheon look on as Grimes replays the actor Carlo Battisti's pathetic gestures of supplication from de

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<sup>3</sup> Keathley, Christian, *Cinephilia and History: Or the Wind in the Trees*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005, p32

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p31

Sica's 1952 film *Umberto D*, where the elderly man Umberto is forced to beg when down on his luck. In her reprisal of Battisti's gestures, Grimes is an incongruous figure. Performing outside the diegetic temporality of the film's narrative and reflecting the spatial dynamics of a country and cityscape altered over time, the actions she mimes hold no meaning amongst the milling crowds of present day Rome. Yet, in the great seriousness with which she attempts to embody the gestures of Umberto, the political urgencies of de Sica's neo-realist cinema are re-asserted.

Perhaps Grimes might also be understood as a lost member of that non-professional cast of performers, which de Sica, Rossellini and Pasolini enlisted in order to reflect the authentic experience of working class Romans in their films? In her mute gestures, missing a *mise en scène* to anchor them, Grimes magnifies their awkward and unpolished performances, in a homage to the actors and extras - often children - who are integral to Neorealist cinema, yet existed on the margins of the burgeoning Italian film industry and its star systems. The naturalism inherent to the performances of non-actors such as the young boy Bruno (played by Enzo Staiola), and his father Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani) in de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, for example, asserts the real life struggles of the working class simply through their demeanour and expression, rather than acting skill. As Bazin explains, De Sica's approach: 'calls upon the actor to *be* before expressing himself...Bruno was a silhouette, a face, a way of talking.'<sup>6</sup> In *Mozzarella in Carozza*, Grimes removes all of the contextualising detail for a scene in the film where Bruno eats a plate of the Roman cheese dish, mozzarella in carozza, in a cafe. Replacing the bustling sequence of the original, noisy with Roman diners, with the contemporary minimalism of an air bnb apartment, Grimes' own awkward and solitary attempt to master the stringy strands of cheese magnifies the gestures and nuances of Bruno's performance, and exposes the gap - always hidden in narrative continuity - between the character, and the boy who played him. Her furtive glances out of frame alludes to the missing montage of looks exchanged between Bruno and the child of a more bourgeois family at another table. In this performance of subtle glances, Grimes evokes the invisible space of the crowded cafe, so that other cinephiles might restore the scene, so richly comic yet fraught with class tensions, as their own cinephiliac moment. For those unfamiliar with the film, it is this very sense of enigmatic lack that makes Grimes' performance in *Mozzarella in Carozza* powerful. Her actions are not so much mute or unreadable as existent on another cinephiliac frequency. Grimes' intense occupation of this other space and time opens up cultural readings and memories beyond those of celluloid. Indeed, references from the field of art rather than film might productively elicit the task based video and performance works of artists such

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<sup>6</sup> Bazin, Andre, 'De Sica: Metteur en Scene', *What is Cinema? Volume 11*, University of California Press: London, 1972, p65

as Bruce Nauman or Marina Abramovic, for example, and in the exaggerated pathos of Grime's wordless and expressive gestures, we might also encounter the visual comedy of Chaplin's Little Tramp.

For the Dada and Surrealists, Chaplin's jerky syncopations were foremost an embodiment of cinema's mechanical modernity, rather than a mark of his poverty. Yet they also understood that his popular appeal sprung from his absurdist embodiment of the travails of the working class in the industrial age. One figure renowned for fulfilling this function in post war Italy was the Italian comic actor Antonio De Curtis, simply known as Toto, whose expressive features have increasingly come to haunt Grimes' work since her Rome sojourn. Discovered during research on her residency, Toto became her 'leading man', and his distinctive beak nosed face first appears, sharply delineated on black, in stencil works such as *Toto and le Tre Sorelle Fontana*, or *Toto meets San Bartolomeo*. As the titles suggest, Grimes allows Toto to steal into other cultural references from painting and architecture, so that he might even be found amongst the comedic figures that dance on Etruscan friezes and also pervade Grimes' stencil works. Trickster figure, as well as muse, Toto's tragi-comic visage emerges across drawings, stencil works and is even modelled as small clay heads, evoking the spirit of the carnivalesque, inherent in the Italian tradition of bawdy medieval morality plays by Boccaccio and performed at the *Commedia dell' arte*. According to Mikhail Bakhtin's terms of 'carnival culture', their satirical plots and lowly protagonists: "brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred and the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid."<sup>7</sup> Toto's presence across Grimes' drawings, stencils and clay models shows her appreciation of his place in this rich and visceral legacy.

Toto was also muse to Pasolini, who spoke of how he was attracted to what he perceived as Toto's 'double nature - on the one hand there's the sub-proletariat Neapolitan, on the other there's the pure and simple clown, that is to say the unhinged puppet, the joker, the man who pulls faces.'<sup>8</sup> Pasolini's reference to the subproletariat demonstrates a point of difference with Neorealist counterparts such as Roberto Rossellini and de Sica. Whilst the characters in *Bicycle Thieves*, for example, are presented as noble protagonist victims in the universalised struggle of

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Platter, *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres*, John Hopkins University Press, 2007, p7

<sup>8</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini (1974), 'Here's My Toto', first published in *La Repubblica*, August 3, 1976, republished in *Uccellacci E Uccellini*, DVD booklet, Masters of Cinema Series #109, 2012, p22

the working class, Pasolini was intent on a more complex picture of class struggle, not always palatable to Italy's Left intellectuals, but indebted to the Marxist political theory of Antonio Gramsci. In his combination of slapstick viscerality and sly innuendo, Toto personified, as Peter Bondanella explains: '...the peasant class in Italy ... whose members were generally dismissed even by leftists in the North as illiterate and uncultured *cafoni* (ill-mannered and uncultured people).'<sup>9</sup> But for Pasolini this was compellingly combined with a preternatural innocence, which signified, according to Bondanella: 'preindustrial, mythical consciousness, a sense of mystery and awe in face of physical reality which Pasolini defines as a prehistorical, pre-Christian and prebourgeois phenomenon.'<sup>10</sup> It is this comic fusion of naivety and cunning that Toto performs as the main character, along with Ninetto Davoli, in Pasolini's 1965 film *Uccellacci and Uccellini*. Conceived by Pasolini as an 'ideo-comic' film, where political ideology and comedy meet, the pair perform dual roles in a tale within a tale. In the outer, establishing plot, like travelling players in a tale from Boccaccio, they wander the shanty towns, half built roads and half ruined buildings on the outskirts of contemporary Rome as the father and son duo 'Innocenti Toto' and 'Innocente Ninetto', incongruously accompanied by a talking crow, espousing Marxist ideology. This eccentric road trip frames a further tale, but now the travel is backwards to a time when the couple are two Franciscan monks, Brother Cicillo and Brother Ninetto, tasked by Jesus to convey the message of God to the ucellacci (big birds) and ucellini (little birds), who signify for Pasolini the power struggle between Italy's upper and lower classes. Grimes' interest in *Uccellacci and Uccellini* was already apparent in a work from the Etruscan series, *U.E.U.*, in which she echoes Brother Ninetto's mimicry of the jerky walk of the sparrows with her own gawky mimesis, seeing in it 'a sublime dance of mis-communication, mis-translation, absurd jumpy hand gestures', confluent with her own experience as a visitor to Rome. But the bird metaphor that permeates Pasolini's film also permeated her own experience of the city, where 'bird calls haunted me in the studio, their repetitive song and dawn chorus invaded my dreams.'

Grimes' more concentrated exploration of *Uccellacci and Uccellini* at The Bower - whose own arboreal setting gives prevalence to birdsong - draws together the motifs of bird and clown, Neorealism and the Etruscans, which still resonate from her Rome encounters. In *Hail the New Etruscan #3*, the small gallery fills with portraits of Neorealism's melancholy child actors, rendered bird-like in delicate pencil, alongside Toto's avian profile in clay and on paper, and a single film 'The Nest is Served', which returns to a sequence in Pasolini's bird filled film. Rather than Toto, Ninetto or the

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<sup>9</sup> Bondanella, Peter, *A History of Italian Cinema*, London: British Film Institute, 2013 (new ed) p231

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p232

Leftist reflections of their talking crow companion, however, Grimes concentrates on just one haunting encounter of their travels, that mingles pathos and cruelty. As unseen children call hungrily from upstairs, a mother cooks and serves a bird's nest to a silent man, perhaps with exhaustion and hopelessness. Shuffling on her knees across the floor to Toto, her heartless landlord, she appeals against eviction. In this brief portrait of extreme poverty, her abject actions present a sobering twist on Pasolini's allegorical play on birds. Here the nest, symbol of nurture and home, must be sacrificed to prevent starvation. Like a cacophonous nest of unseen chicks, the children call for food from upstairs.

Why return to the horror of this scene of indelible strangeness? Perhaps because of its enigmatic power. By embodying the woman's deadpan performance, Grimes might thus inhabit the space of the scene, to both understand it more intensely, and to conjure into the Bower a figment of the empty room, the strange meal and the children's bird like cries. In this way she offers up her own enchantment with these images, sharing a cinephiliac moment that reaches beyond the ideological intentions of its director, to explore other potential readings and imagined narratives that Pasolini didn't pursue. What of the woman's own resilience and ingenuity in the face of poverty? How does a bird's nest taste?