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*Lazzaro felice*. Directed and written by Alice Rohrwacher. Tempesta Films, 2018. 125 minutes.

Director Alice Rohrwacher's third feature-length film, *Lazzaro felice / Happy as Lazzaro*, is a fable inspired by the bizarre, true story of a Marquise who failed to let the peasants on her land know when sharecropping legally ended in 1982. Thus, a community of people continued to live, isolated and in servitude, while around them the world was changing. In *Happy as Lazzaro*, the "Queen of Cigarettes," Marquise Alfonsina de Luna (Nicoletta Braschi) brazenly enjoys her fictional fiefdom, while Lazzaro (Adriano Tardiolo) and his fellow peasants work the fields, sleep and eat in overcrowded, dilapidated quarters, share their meager rations, and strategically position a lightbulb where they need it most. Although Lazzaro stands at the center of the peasants' life in Inviolata because he is a workhorse, from an affective perspective, he exists at the margins. Unfailingly gentle and equally happy to comply with demands from Marquises or fellow peasants, he is exploited by all. At the film's midpoint he plummets from a precipice to a ravine below, and his dramatic fall launches the film's transition in terms of both time and space. Years later, we encounter the peasants patching together a scanty existence as grifters on the outskirts of a large, gray metropolitan area. Lazzaro, who awakens from his years-long slumber not a day older than he was before, undertakes a perilous journey to find his former companions. The film's two-part structure unveils continuities between urban and rural poverty, as well as the devastating social effects of exploitation and neglect on both peasants and the urban poor.



Fig. 1: Lazzaro takes a brief respite from work at Inviolata. Still.

*Happy as Lazzaro* affirms Rohrwacher's extraordinary ability to provide viewers a cinematic respite while simultaneously confronting heartbreaking realities. The film's gorgeous frames and complex soundtrack immerse us in a world both familiar and strange. Some of the acting feels awkward: Braschi's Marquise is flat and soulless, and Tardiolo's Lazzaro is wide-eyed and strangely unperceptive. Yet in this cinematic fable, the Marquise represents a depth of greed

that *should*, in fact, be unrealistic. Lazzaro gazes on the world with a good faith that indeed defies logic. Between these two extremes, the chorus of peasants is alternately cheery, angry, sly, disappointed, and defiant, occupying a rather strange position as an all-too-realistic subaltern middle ground.

*Happy as Lazzaro* received numerous awards and accolades from across Europe and the United States. In Italy, although it was nominated for nine David di Donatello awards, it won none. *Lazzaro* was named Best Screenplay at Cannes, and juries elsewhere praised the film's ideological achievements. The Jerusalem Film Festival, for example, awarded it a Spirit of Freedom award and commended *Lazzaro*'s director for "her profound thinking, and free viewpoint." The award committee argued that "[t]he film's hero leads us toward what our world needs most: compassion." At the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the youth jury expressed its enthusiasm with this statement: "We believe that Lazzaro will inspire a future audience to be more humane and reflect on their daily experiences and interactions."<sup>1</sup> The film has thus been recognized for its ethical, compassionate take on the human condition.

Yet, although the film's awards have pointed out the "humane" qualities of its "hero," *Lazzaro felice*'s ethical positioning emphasizes human reliance on a more-than-human world, affirming Rohrwacher as one of the most important environmental filmmakers in contemporary Italy. For one, *Happy as Lazzaro*'s producers, Tempesta Films, are pioneering an initiative called EcoMuvi, a European protocol for sustainable films. Rohrwacher's film participated in this protocol, and reportedly saved 10 tons of CO2 in the pre-production and production processes.<sup>2</sup>

The ecological strength of the film also lies in its slow aesthetic: *Happy as Lazzaro* was shot on super16 film by H el ene Louvart, who also was the director of photography for *Le Meraviglie / The Wonders* (2014) and *Corpo Celeste / Heavenly Body* (2011). The choice of analog, says the director, requires extra care and preparation, and also fosters slowness and secrecy, as the day's rushes cannot be immediately seen.<sup>3</sup> Such dilated production time cultivates an "attentive mode of observation and the development of an ecologically oriented gaze" which, according to Stephanie Lam, is a characteristic of "slow cinema."<sup>4</sup> The grain visible in Louvart's stunning camerawork, and Rohrwacher's patient pacing, whether capturing dramatic hillsides, traffic circles, or intimate groups of people around a fire, affords a depth and a warmth that attunes viewer attention to the fragility and nuance of relationships between people, creatures, and things.

One of the most striking, and potentially radical, qualities of the film is its quirky relationship to time. Lam has suggested that "one of the challenges of environmental thought and environmental advocacy, in particular, is the ability to communicate and represent timescales that are outside human perception."<sup>5</sup> *Happy as Lazzaro* operates on what we might call a queer ecological timescale, a framework that unsettles binaries (including urban/rural, human/animal, rich/poor, past/present), unearths alternative kinships, and unmoors time from reproductive, heteronormative linearity. With the exception of their light bulb, for instance, the peasants at the beginning seem to live in the nineteenth century. Gradually, though, conflicting historical

<sup>1</sup> "Lazzaro felice Awards." *Imdb.com*, accessed March 28, 2019.

[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6752992/awards?ref=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6752992/awards?ref=tt_awd)

<sup>2</sup> *Happy as Lazzaro* press kit. Tempesta Film, 2018. For more information (albeit limited) on the EcoMuvi protocol, see <http://www.tempestaofilm.it/en/ecomuvi/>. Thank you to Laura Di Bianco for making me aware of EcoMuvi through her work on ecocinema.

<sup>3</sup> Alice Rohrwacher, "Comments," *Happy as Lazzaro* press kit. Tempesta Film, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Lam, "It's About Time: Slow Aesthetics in Experimental Ecocinema and Nature Cam Videos," in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 207.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

evidence enters the narrative, including a cell phone, various four-wheeled vehicles, and then a modern, consumerist city.

More radically, planetary time passes in fits and starts: first, after Lazzaro has taken to bed with a fever, the moon passes from full to half full in the space of seconds, in one unobtrusive cut. Later, as one of the peasants recounts a fable about a wolf and a saint, the camera focuses on a mountain top and the image blinks, pulsating for a split-second in a nearly imperceptible cut between one frame and the next. This visual pulse seems to constitute a wrinkle in time, pitching the film unexpectedly into the future. In the subsequent scene, a curious wolf comes to sniff Lazzaro's immobile body, which lies below a cliff. As if prompted by the animal's breath, he rises from his dusty deathbed, and although he does not know it, many years have passed in the blink of an (our) eye. Lazzaro's kinship with the wolf and the moon accentuates his queer status, his position in what Timothy Morton calls the "*mesh*": "a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment."<sup>6</sup> In his universe, the impossible is possible, although still relentlessly mundane.

The film's strange temporal regimes and peculiar astronomy continue in the urban section of the narrative. On the outskirts of the city, the peasants live in what appears to be a large metal water tank marked "E-MITA." Although the large letters likely signal an industrial acronym, "Emita" also happens to be the name of a minor planet orbiting the sun, discovered by the Italian astronomer Luigi Carnera in 1902. Upon encountering a middle-aged Tancredi (Tommaso Ragno), the brash and imaginative son of the Marquise, and his dog Ercole, in the city, the peasants gather for an evening of music and merriment in the belly of their minor planet. Tancredi takes a metal frying pan and improvises a moon, which he arcs poetically across the frame. The evocation of a performative human/lunar time inspires him and Lazzaro to howl, as they used to at Inviolata, and prompts wolves to respond from the distance. Suddenly, in the dim light of the water tank, time blips and the peasants are young again. Here and elsewhere in the film, it seems that "against pain and loss," Lazzaro's queer ecological time can conjure lines of flight, creating "interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times."<sup>7</sup> Lazzaro's magical gift is to liberate his companions from what Elizabeth Freeman calls "time binds," or the "narrow chronopolitics" that allow only some humans, some creatures, some histories to count.<sup>8</sup> This liberating temporality, arguably, is also part of Rohrwacher's gift.

Queer time, Elizabeth Freeman argues, "must dismantle the chronopolitics of development" in order to pressure the "*periodizing* apparatuses" of the state and the market.<sup>9</sup> *Happy as Lazzaro's* queer ecological time gently exerts pressure on the temporal frames of history, nature, and cinema. Lunar time, in *Lazzaro*, is not precisely cyclical, nor does it guide "natural" rhythms. Historical time is not linear. The city is not devoid of wild nature, as we see when the peasants learn to harvest potatoes and wild greens from the parking lot where they live—but then, the countryside was no idyll. And yet in spite of these temporal and conceptual vibrations, time, at last, seems to catch up. In the film's final minutes, Lazzaro lies immobile on a stony

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology," *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (2010): 275-6.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* 84-85, no. 3-4 (2005): 59. My thanks to Monica Seger and Jonathan Mullins for organizing a fascinating roundtable on "Queer Ecologies" at the American Association for Italian Studies Conference in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, March 2019, and to Mullins for recommending the Freeman reading.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

floor, and the wolf runs towards us on a busy street, frightened by the aggressive horns of passing cars. The miraculous multispecies alliance seems to have fractured here, and time binds once more. When the image cuts to black, Rohrwacher's dilated cinematic time suddenly disappears in a heartbeat, leaving viewers both bereft and enchanted, not quite ready to return to the grind of historicity.

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