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*My Brilliant Friend*. Directed by Saverio Costanzo. Screenplay by Saverio Costanzo, Elena Ferrante, Laura Paolucci, Francesco Piccolo. Italy/USA. Fandango, Wildside, Umedia, in collaboration with Rai Fiction, TimVision, HBO, 2018.

Saverio Costanzo's adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend*, the first book in Elena Ferrante's tetralogy known to American readers as the "Neapolitan novels," premiered on HBO on November 18, 2018 and on the Italian public broadcasting service Rai on November 27. The highly anticipated eight-episode series put the worries of Ferrante's fans to rest: the televised rendition of their beloved bestseller closely follows the source material. With an excellent audience share (at 30% in Italy) and a plethora of positive reviews, the HBO/Rai co-production proves that adaptations of global literary phenomena can be rigorous and creative, uncompromising but also crowd pleasing, sophisticated and simultaneously entertaining.

Ferrante herself suggested that Costanzo direct the TV series. Costanzo had already "encountered" the author more than a decade prior, when he was granted the rights to adapt her fourth novel, *La figlia oscura/The Lost Daughter* (2006), but then abandoned the project. Costanzo boasts a solid résumé in film adaptation, screenwriting, and transnational television. With the exception of his debut feature, all of his films are based on (Italian) novels, for which he has also written or co-written the screenplay. Furthermore, he directed the television series *In Treatment* (Sky Cinema, 2013, 2015, 2017). Originally developed in Israel as *Be Tipul/In Therapy* (2005-08), this series has been remade in numerous countries. Costanzo's Italian version was closely modeled upon the American episodes (HBO, 2008, 2010).

With the goal of providing unexplored points of view on *My Brilliant Friend* amid so many articles that have already examined this successful TV series, I will discuss how the director's "personal artistic filters"<sup>1</sup> transpire throughout the episodes of the first season. An understanding of Costanzo's ideas of cinema will also prove helpful in debunking the neorealist affiliations that numerous reviewers have attributed to Costanzo's adaptation.

In *My Brilliant Friend* Costanzo skillfully captures the essence of Ferrante's masterpiece without conceding his own cinematic style and by punctuating the (small) screen version of Lenù and Lila's friendship with his own visual and thematic tropes. Two of Costanzo's recurrent motifs are genre hybridity, with horror as the most diffuse of the genre contaminations, and confined spaces.<sup>2</sup> These two tropes also appear in *My Brilliant Friend*. In his adaptation, Costanzo pushes the dark fairy-tale elements of the novel to the edges of the supernatural nightmares of horror movies. The prologue, a scene that was not in the novel, is designed like a horror visual trope and functions as the director's signature. Here, Elena ends her phone conversation with Rino, rudely dismissing him. "It's your problem. I can't help you." Sitting at her desk, in a medium shot, she raises her eyes and looks forward toward the camera. The following shot, edited as if it were Elena's subjective view, shows the ghost-like apparition of Lila as a child in a rocking chair, immersed in darkness. An eerie music (composed by Max Richter) begins to play here, accentuating the uncanny nature of Lila's presence in the room. The visual-aural construction of this scene is unmistakably that of a ghost horror movie, ending with Lila's stern and defiant gaze (built like a shot/reverse-shot with Elena, but also with us—the viewers) when she stands up and walks toward the hallway, dissolving in the dark. By playing with one of his stylistic motifs, the contamination with horror, this original

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 84.

<sup>2</sup> See Roberta Tabanelli, "Authorial Visions: Saverio Costanzo's Negotiation with Auteurism," *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 4.2 (2016): 211-229.

scene, not present in the novel, assertively remarks, right at the opening of the series, that ‘the artist is present.’

The horror in Costanzo’s adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend* is more than a metaphor for growing up amidst poverty and violence in the outskirts of Naples. It has the actual form of horrific imagery. The “tiny animals” that, in Ferrante’s book, Elena imagined as a child are poetic rather than horrifying creatures, lyricized in the stylistic device of the asyndeton that the writer uses: “they came from the ponds, from the abandoned train cars beyond the embankment, from the stinking grasses called *fetienti*, from the frogs, the salamanders, the flies, the rocks, the dust, and entered the water and the food and the air, making our mothers, our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs.”<sup>3</sup> Costanzo transposes this brief description into the quintessence of art-horror: a one minute-long (creepy) scene with swarms of repellent, crawling bugs, eventually entering the mouth of Elena’s sleeping mother. Episode 1 ends with a typical horror scenario: the descent into a dark, spider-webs-filled cellar and the encounter with the boogeyman. Tension and terror abound in Ferrante’s narration of the dolls and Don Achille. However, Costanzo takes the girls’ stark fable-like imagination, in which the neighborhood’s black-market trafficker was the ogre of fairy-tales, and forges it, in various instances throughout the series, with the visual conventions of horror. So, how is one not to think of the most famous twins of horror films, in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), when Lila and Lenù are seen knocking on Don Achille’s door? Although they are not shot frontally, as in Kubrick’s apparition, the allusion seems unmistakable.

In his works, Costanzo has consistently privileged interiors as locations of his stories in order to offer reflections on the themes of imprisonment and violence.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the setting of *My Brilliant Friend* is constrained and claustrophobic; even the *piazza* in the neighborhood resembles a theater stage rather than the outdoor backdrop of the leisurely strolls of Italians. In the “war” between Melina and Lidia Sarratore, for example, the women of the adjacent buildings become a Greek chorus and the objects that are thrown out of the windows are shot as if they were still-natures, in a series of close-ups that “abstract” them from the narrative. The director’s penchant for and familiarity with confined spaces are perhaps the reasons why the sunny exteriors of Ischia in Episode 6 are less inspired and convincing than the life in the *rione*.

Costanzo’s films are often interspersed with intertextual citations. *La solitudine dei numeri primi/The Solitude of Prime Numbers* (2010), for example, opens with audio-visual resonances from Dario Argento and ends mimicking the finale of *L’avventura/L’Avventura* (Antonioni, 1960).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it was not surprising that the arrest of Alfredo Peluso, in Episode 2 of *My Brilliant Friend*, was staged like the most famous scene in Italian cinema: Anna Magnani running towards the military truck in *Roma, città aperta/Open City* (Rossellini, 1945). This reference, the use of non-professional actors, and the representation of the socio-economic struggle of the lower classes in the post-war years have induced numerous critics to mention neorealism as a background inspiration for the show. However, the setting of *My Brilliant Friend* and Costanzo’s idea of cinema are programmatically anti-neorealist. The neighborhood was entirely reconstructed in the former factory Saint Gobain near Caserta, Italy. In the first two episodes, it is a grim, monochrome, and bare backdrop (designed by Giancarlo Basili), unsettling in the contrast with the sunny, chaotic Naples that many know and closer to the Brechtian abstraction of *Dogville* (von Trier, 2003) than to the on-location authenticity of Italian neorealist films. But that was precisely Costanzo’s intention, to create

<sup>3</sup> Elena Ferrante, *L’amica geniale/My Brilliant Friend*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2012), 37-38.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Costanzo’s confined spaces, see Tabanelli, “Authorial Visions,” 237-221.

<sup>5</sup> See Tabanelli, “Authorial Visions,” 224.

disorientation in the spectator, he declared.<sup>6</sup> In a video interview at the Venice Film Festival, where the first two episodes premiered, Costanzo emphasized the distance from neorealism that they aimed to achieve:

È una rappresentazione della realtà, non è neorealista. [...] Abbiamo costruito delle case, questo ci ha dato la possibilità di controllare tutto e di affidarci completamente alla rappresentazione cinematografica. [...] La storia è molto neorealista ma il modo in cui l'abbiamo raccontata appartiene più a chi come Fellini, per dire, si è opposto al neorealismo costruendo il suo mondo interiore con la cartapesta.

It's a representation of reality; it's not neorealist. [...] We built houses, which provided us with the possibility of controlling everything and of completely trusting the cinematic representation. [...] The story is very neorealist but the way we told it belongs more to someone like Fellini, who opposed neorealism by building his interior world through papier mâché.<sup>7</sup>

In a 2009 interview, he also stressed his affinity with Fellini because he “killed neorealism,” he commented, and argued that, although it is important for a national cinema to remain tied to its own traditions, Italian filmmakers should cut the umbilical cord from the neorealist legacy.<sup>8</sup> He is also quite wary of the “old maestros” of Italian cinema: “As young directors, we are working to escape this enormous legacy of ‘Why should I see a Saverio Costanzo’s movie if I have an Antonioni?’” he laments.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the “memory” of *L'Avventura* in the closing scene of *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* is not likely a tribute to Antonioni but rather, “an open challenge to the canonical art-house film: it is just another cinematic echo,”<sup>10</sup> which is not different from the horror innuendos Costanzo likes to scatter throughout his works. Similarly, the Peluso scene in *My Brilliant Friend* can be read as an irreverent game with the history of Italian cinema. Deviating from the novel,<sup>11</sup> Costanzo inserts Manuela Solara at the end of the scene. She looks straight at the camera, smiling defiantly. Lila captures Manuela’s expression and exclaims, “È stata una femmena,” it was a woman who killed Don Achille. The purpose of Manuela’s presence here is to straighten the narrative (Lila’s hypothesis and the rumors on Don Achille’s murderer will appear later in the Neapolitan novels<sup>12</sup>). But her bold smirk, while looking almost into the camera and at us, seems to say, “Do not believe in what you’ve just watched. This is not a neorealist film.” It is a Costanzo film, where cinematic citations are just playful insertions. “Don’t take them literally” is what the irreverent half-smile of the Solara matriarch seems to suggest.

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<sup>6</sup> Tobias Jones, “From Fellini to Ferrante: The Cinematic Vision of *My Brilliant Friend*,” *The Guardian*, 19 November 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/19/from-fellini-to-ferrante-the-cinematic-vision-my-brilliant-friend>. Accessed 25 March 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Arianna Finos, “*L'amica geniale*, Costanzo: una storia neorealista, colta e popolare insieme,” 2 September 2018. <https://video.repubblica.it/dossier/venezia-75-mostra-cinematografica/l-amica-geniale-costanzo-una-storia-neorealista-colta-e-popolare-insieme/313489/314118>. Accessed 3 April 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Roberta Tabanelli, “Il cinema ‘privato’ di Saverio Costanzo,” in *Zoom d'oltreoceano. Istantanee sui registi italiani e sull'Italia*, ed. Daniela De Pau and Simone Dubrovic (Rome: Vecchiarelli Editore, 2010), 346.

<sup>9</sup> Nick Hasted, “Maestros and Mobsters,” *Sight & Sound*, 5 May 2010: 24.

<sup>10</sup> Tabanelli, “Authorial Visions,” 224.

<sup>11</sup> See Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, 85.

<sup>12</sup> See Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2013), 103 and Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2014), 264, 304, 331.