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Le sorelle Macaluso / The Macaluso Sisters. Directed by Emma Dante. Rosamunt, Minimum Fax Media, RAI Cinema, 2020. 94 minutes.

Seven years after making *Via Castellana Bandiera / A Street in Palermo* (2009), Emma Dante directs her second film, *Le sorelle Macaluso / The Macaluso Sisters* (2020), a screen adaptation of her critically acclaimed 2014 play of the same title. The result is a heartrending, powerful film about life and death, loss, grief, and sisterhood.

Five young, orphaned sisters live in an old apartment facing the sea on the outskirts of Palermo, Sicily. They make their living by breeding doves and renting them for lavish weddings or funerals. Despite their modest circumstances, the girls live joyfully. Pinuccia enjoys the admiration of suitors for her sensual beauty; Maria dreams of becoming a dancer; the tranquil Katia loves food; the introverted Lia loves books; and the youngest, the sweet five-year-old Antonella, loves Barbie dolls, chocolate, and entertaining the doves with a music box that plays Eric Satie's *Gymnopédie No.1* (the film's melancholic musical leitmotif).

One summer day, the sisters' journey to the village of Mondello and sneak into its historic bathing club, Charleston. Soon, however, a day of happy frolics turns tragic as the young Antonella dies after slipping from a ladder leading up to one of the club's private decks. This loss marks the end of the girls' youth and of any chance for their future happiness. Katia eventually leaves and marries. The others continue living in the apartment for many years, imprisoned by their sense of guilt and resentment. Maria, who gave up the dream of being a dancer, dies in her early forties consumed by sorrow and stomach cancer. The older Pinuccia, who had continued in her maternal role for a time, leaves soon after. Lia, who blames herself for the accident, remains until the film's end, seemingly alone, but surrounded by the ghosts of her lost sisters, who haunt the rooms of the apartment and sometimes appear in the material space.

While centering on the very human sentiment of grief and how it can tragically shape one's existence, *The Macaluso Sisters* is also concerned with the lives and suffering of nonhuman animals. A suggestive scene of reading, in fact, reveals a posthuman belief in the film. When Lia, who grew old in the apartment, feels close to her own end, she remembers how her sister Maria, who had died many years earlier, used to read for her:

Small beings are pure and kind. They are not greedy. They do not know accumulation nor waste. They take care of their little ones, whether they are beautiful or ugly, desired or unwanted and, in the meantime, they provide thousands (what am I saying, myriads) of precious services to humans. In other times, they fed, raised, and covered them, just like mothers. They kept them company (there was no one on Earth to console them). [...] The birds – another family of angelic origin – in the thick of the forests sang for them, reminding them that the sky had not forgotten them. And in the sky, they know, instinctively, it was their origins.¹

This lyrical page comes from Anna Maria Ortese's collection of essays *Piccole persone / Small Beings* (2017), a consuming defense of animal rights. In addition to paying homage to a writer whose ecological sensitivity might have been a source of inspiration for Dante, the scene poignantly conveys the idea of human-non-human kinship that permeates the story.

In the spirit of Ortese's work, the film also exposes cruelty against animals in a scene where we see an emaciated Maria working in a medical laboratory. There, a furry animal is being skinned and its heart bloodily extracted from its body and saved in a plastic bag for a future experiment. A pink

¹ Anna Maria Ortese, *Le piccole persone. In difesa degli animali ed altri scritti* (Milano: Adelphi, 2016), 114, my translation.

flamingo lies lifeless, along with the head of a cow, whose tongue hangs in a horrific smirk, on the counter. As the camera—at an uncomfortable length—sustains for the viewer these graphic details, we are reminded of nonhuman suffering, which they share with other humans, voiceless small beings, such as the Macaluso sisters. While the scene might feel disconnected from the rest of the story and the change of settings perhaps too jarring, the scene reiterates with a strong dramatic impact, the human-nonhuman interconnectedness, by conceptually and visually linking a woman's dying body with animals' corpses.

Living nonhuman characters, in the film, are employed in service and as companions of humans. The doves, in fact, once a source of livelihood for the sisters, are beautifully framed throughout the film: they whirl in the sky above the building, and they wander around in empty rooms. No longer rented to others to celebrate the happy occasions now incomprehensible to the sorrowful sisters, they continue to cohabitate in the space and mourn with the Macalusos until the end.

In addition to the doves, the sea, the river, and the house, with its fading wallpaper and rundown furniture, are also treated as characters, and framed emptied of human presence. Vegetation, which grows wildly along the Oreto river, framed in beautiful aerial views, seems to erupt in liminal urban spaces, breaking through the pervasive concrete; recurrent liquid POV shots (from the water surface) give the sea a menacing preeminence and give the viewers the impression of being immersed in water, struggling to stay afloat. Similarly, toward the end of the film, the sea moves visually closer and closer to the decaying building in which the Macaluso sisters, alive and dead, live, seemingly re-appropriating spaces taken by the city and its inhabitants.

Presented at the 77th edition of the Venice Film Festival in 2020 and released when movie theaters were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Macaluso Sisters* had very limited circulation, (not unlike most contemporary Italian contemporary films at any time, but especially those distributed in the last two years). Fortunately, Dante's film was released in the United States in 2021 and is now available on streaming platforms with English subtitles, thereby gaining a broader audience.

Indeed, compelling films like *The Macaluso Sisters*, which poetically illustrate a posthuman inclination in contemporary Italian cinema (and especially among films directed by women), ought to be seen, as we contemplate the losses of the pandemic and confront the disasters of climate change. Hopefully, such ecologically concerned cinema, to use Dante's words, will inspire us toward "down-sizing our arrogance and our encumbrance."²

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² Chiara Borroni, "Le sorelle Macaluso. Intervista ad Emma Dante." *Cineforum*. 18 December 2020. <https://www.cineforum.it/intervista/Intervista-a-Emma-Dante-Le-sorelle-Macaluso>. A shorter version of this review appears in my book, *Wandering Women. Urban Ecologies of Italian Feminist Filmmaking*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022.