

Vampires of the real

by Antonio Pezzuto

What sense is there in doing something that has already been done. What sense is there in telling stories that have already been told. These were the questions addressed by Olivier Assayas in a film of the 1990s, and they are questions that have been central always, and to which the answers given over the course of time have always – as always, as for all answers, the flavour of the years in which they live. Obviously, there are many different ways of showing and allowing one to see things that have already been shown and already been seen: there is he who plays with these things, hoping not to be discovered; he who claims responsibility for them; he who uses them as a device to hide crises of creativity; and he who readapts topics to different societies (American film producers are masters of these examples); or he who needs them to tackle themes and thoughts that have already been tackled, after years have passed, after other themes and thoughts have transformed them.

But there can also be completely different reasons, such as for those who need to "re-see" in order to verify their own identity. And this is the case with the Minotaur, told by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who lives in a labyrinth of mirrors, and in this labyrinth he sees the image of his image, replicated to infinity, and with this image he nurtures his own fantasy and constructs the "I".

The hybrid monster of the Minotaur, as television is a hybrid monster that finds meaning in itself (its self-reference has become, today more than ever, an ethical and semantic characteristic). And in its being watched and reflecting "normal people's society", it rises up as the scourge of morals, and the creator of the only ways in which these morals can be represented. With the birth of television in Italy was born united Italy as we know it today, a society with a common language and dreams. Slowly distancing the public from the collective vision of the movie theatres, those visions that told of Neo-Realism and "white telephone" films, television transferred the experience into people's living rooms, taking the place of dinner discussions, imposing daily new topics of discussion and morals. The cinematic image was not born from the similarity of spirit, but from its breadth. Television distorted that image, making it assimilable to reality: Mike Bongiorno was one of us, the flood of the river Po happened outside our house, Alfredino of Vermicino was our cousin or our nephew.

That social and, therefore, political consequences derive from technology is obvious (on a grand scale, one observes how it's enough to see the enemy in order to kill him, says both Paul Virilio and the entire experience of recent wars; on a smaller scale one sees how the Internet and digital have completely transformed our rapport with culture and with others), and that the way of becoming acquainted with existence - for the generation that is now 30-40 years old - derives in large part from television is very clear. *"What matters to me,"* says Rà di Martino, speaking of *La camera*, *"is how images became our collective conscience. All of a sudden, there was a standardisation; it's a little like what Pier Paolo Pasolini said: everything becomes crushed by television, everyone will have the same memories."*

On one level, *La camera* is an investigation into how we were prepared to accept what would then become today's media bombardment. And there's no better point of view than the documentary – in the 1950s an almost total monopoly of the Istituto Luce – and, in particular, those documentaries that tell of television's infiltration into Italy, with its first centres of production and its slow insertion into the country and into people's homes. *"I don't judge the violence of the images; it's the way it is. I consider it one of the principle things that we are part of. I don't want to underline the positive and negative sides, it's love-hate, but it's definitely a violent influence.* That is: the beginnings of the times in which the image began its domain and became not only the reflection of those times, of the point of view of the individual, but also the multiplying mirror, the labyrinth of Daedalus, the generator of thousands of contemporary collective images. And the creator of a collective conscience, that same collective conscience today shattered by a fragmented vision, between surfing the Internet, Play Station, and switching TV channels. *"I didn't interview my 18 year old brother, or his friends, because I realised that they have a different way of perceiving images; they are more like slaves to the Internet and television. They have completely different schedules. How they perceive television in completely different, it's kind of like a video game. I was more interested in the discourse of our generations, those whose first impact growing up was television.*

And the question with which we began (what is the sense of telling a story that's already been told) could be inverted. Every vision is an experience, so does it make sense to live an experience that can't be told? Television, in fact, not only changed our way of perceiving and living the quotidian; television, or the television image, also created a different way of perceiving the image and of experiencing conscience. One of the last experiments performed by Marshall McLuhan consisted of showing the same film to an audience: one part saw the image projected onto a cinematic screen, while the other part saw it projected from behind, as it is projected from behind a television screen. These two groups were then asked to write about what they had seen. While the "cinematic public" told about the story, frames and editing, the other group, the television group, spoke about themselves in relation to the film. But this was an experiment of the 1960s, and today everything is different, televisual criticism is different. Televisual became any kind of vision, and the single individual, connected to the world, is at the centre of every political, social or cultural thought. Televisual in the sense that, today, any vision is brought back to its experience. There has never been, today more than ever, an objective viewer. The vision is single, every frame seen is seen individually, then re-elaborated and edited together with other visions, all the visions we have. Each one just and true. Each one close to all our daily visions, real, oneiric or someone else's.

Jean-Luc Godard says that two contrary realities do not unite but oppose each other. An image isn't powerful because it's brutal or fantastic, but because the association of ideas is remote. The combination of pre-television images with televisual perceptions is the combining of contrary realities; it is, returning to cinema, to bind Michelangelo Antonioni ("Factories can also be endowed with great beauty. The straight lines and curves of the factories and their chimneys can be more beautiful than a row of trees that the eye has already seen too many times," he once said in an interview with Godard) with the rural Italy of Pasolini. *"I wanted to create a domestic situation, the 1950s family located in a stylised landscape, a small meadow that corresponds to my interior landscape. And among these elements I wanted to insert a strange perspective. The black and white film recalls those years, but there are characters that recite people talking about Blade Runner, creating disorientation. These are signals of the flattening of time. And of the multiplication of glances. It's like the Minotaur, who is us, is today no longer able to recognise what is true and what is an image. And the Minotaur died from this.*