

## **Pupi Avati's Cinema**

di Fabio Canessa

Pupi Avati is a pleasant exception in the world of Italian cinema. Intolerant of fashion, far from being afraid of getting dirty with the clichéd genre movies, and not slave to the respect for a serious and snobbish authorial idea, he has always followed his own prolific and motley inspiration, by imposing his own personality as a writer and filmmaker, able to transform into images a world full of moods, ideas and emotions going to the heart of the spectator through an unmistakable stylistic mark. What flows and blends into his movies is the atmosphere of an extremely small town of a province that encloses the whole universe, the nonsense whim, the fiendish grin of the Gothic atmospheres, the shameless emotional impudence, a naturalist care for the small details of everyday life, the sudden outbreak of a fantastic inspiration, the temptation towards the musical, the delight for the historical fresco, the tenderness for the simplicity of the humble, the pleasure for magic and wonder, the intense recreation of reality, the fanciful grace of imagination, the sense of the sacred, the mocking pleasure for desecration, the striking recollection of the tradition's heritage, the desire to break the rules and renew, the bad scratch that unmasks hypocrisy, the black humor, the storytelling of the novelistic prose and the lyric rising up of poetry. Avati's cinema, already made up of forty-one movies so far, is like a perfectly orchestrated jam session of different stories and styles, like a jazz score of a surprising swing that blends perfectly with Avati's passion for the syncopated music as a clarinetist. Skilfully alternating tragedy and irony, the eye of the director tells with the same love about the crazy Italian Po River Valley people and about Bix Beiderbecke, the clerks and Mozart on a visit to Bologna, the medieval knights and a class of students on a trip to the Apennines, the crisis of actors, directors and football coaches and that of a cunning of the neighbourhood. Both the evil lurking in the dark fairy tales, and another one threatening us because of Alzheimer's disease are mixed with the heroic spirit of sacrifice of genuine people, cherishing their impossible dreams all their lives. Often transposing into the past some burning neuroses of modernity, Avati seems to be saying that at all times and everywhere, man is always the same: all the characters, the young musicians in "Jazz band" for instance, or the citizens of the Middle Ages in "Magnificat", the father in the fascist years played by Silvio Orlando, and the contemporary one played by Johnny Dorelli, or Carlo Delle Piane's character in "Una gita scolastica" and in "Festa di laurea", or Antonio Albanese's in "La seconda notte di nozze", and the group of friends playing cards in "Regalo di Natale" or those in Margherita's bar, in any case they are affected by the humiliation of failure, by the desire to be loved, the anxiety about the silence of God, the agony for a wasted talent, the harmful power of betrayal and deception. Ridiculous caricatures or shady individuals, shy lovers whose love is never returned, or boasters in a pub, Avati's characters

are all too human as human beings, halfway between Palazzeschi's style in his collection of stories "Il palio dei buffi" and De Amicis's characters, but like molded also by Federico Fellini's "Amarcord (I Remember)", and observed with malicious affability by a director who, identifying himself with them, first of all lashes himself. While showing them as miserable, he is always ready to celebrate their sacredness. When you go down the last steps of a relentless descent to Hell, you can always expect an unexpected redemption, and a light of hope spreads again in the middle of the the gloomiest darkness. Daring to manage the strongest pessimism, Avati can also open to an exaggerated optimism. The odd son of a later denied 1968 Italian history, and of the Fellinian cinema revived through the eyes of an artist against the current, Avati is both down-to-earth and metaphysical, a Catholic and a pessimist, enchanted and disenchanted, able to dare extreme feelings and surreal gleams, like some of his wisely crazy characters. Yet, from a certain distance, we're going to see that, actually, just this director, whose tastes and genres were at most out of the Italian cinema tradition (his break-ins into the horror genre are memorable), is going to be the one that, pretending to ignore our days, has been able to give us a truer picture of last fifty years' Italy. Producing an enviable average of two films a year, Pupi Avati has been able to give the viewers a range of emotions wide as the world, making us laugh out loud and jump on the chair, inspiring us an existential bitterness or a melancholic yearning, giving us a noir thrill or an overwhelming love story, using from time to time the worlds of cinema or football as backgrounds, the Italian Po River Valley countryside or the medieval forests, the secret tunnels of an American cursed house or the Italian public offices, the pubs of a province or Umbria Jazz's workshops. The author of beautiful novels then used as subjects for his films, Avati is also a masterly director of his actors, always best used and brilliantly guided into an original expressive mode, respect to their typical roles. Among the noteworthiest ones, Ugo Tognazzi in "Ultimo minuto", Abatantuono in "Regalo di Natale", Katia Ricciarelli in "La seconda notte di nozze", Silvio Orlando, winner at the Venice Festival of an award for "Il papà di Giovanna", delivered by Lo Cascio, he himself acting in "Gli amici del bar Margherita"; then the unrecognizable Boldi and De Sica of "Festival" and "Il figlio più piccolo" until the often present Capolicchio, Cavina, Nik Novecento, Neri Marcoré, Laura Morante and Francesca Neri, convincing more than ever, not to mention the great Giancarlo Giannini in a role meant at first for Alberto Sordi in "Il cuore altrove"; then Gabriele Lavia in "Zeder", Carlo Cecchi in "L'arcano incantatore" and Luca Zingaretti in "Il figlio più piccolo". A separate treatment would be necessary for Avati's TV productions, where he has often been a precursor to an amusing screwball humor, with Arbore or Chiambretti, in now forgotten precious sketches like in the lovely fiction "Dancing Paradise" or the irresistible tv show "Hamburger Serenade", a mishmash of humor and a real forerunner. Being the author of a real requiem for Italian cinema as "La cena per farli conoscere", with some moving tributes to Pietro Germi and

Sergio Corbucci, Avati doesn't seem to have taken into serious account his own cinema. So wide and long lasting to incorporate all genres and authors, thus squeezing the juice of the Italian comedy as much as the teachings of the great masters (Fellini in particular), then shaking and rearranging them, but allowing us to identify all the ingredients, even if prepared according to the "doc" recipe made with Avati's touch, just to give them an endless youth.