

Film

Great Fleas and Lesser Fleas

Brian McClinton

SO Naturalists observe, a flea
Hath smaller fleas that on him prey;
And these have smaller still to bite 'em,
And so proceed ad infinitum
Jonathan Swift: *On Poetry: A Rhapsody*, 1733

IS the desire to exploit others the product of particular social structures or an enduring trait of human nature? That is a question posed by viewing *Happy as Lazzaro* (Lazzaro Felice), Alice Rohrwacher's winner of the Best Screenplay at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, now out on DVD. It is a film which seeks to recapture not only the essence of Italian neo-realist cinema but also the allegorical fantasy that featured in some of the later works.

The height of Italian neorealism covered the years 1943 to 1954 and included: Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) and *La Terra Trema* (1948); Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1946); De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Miracle in Milan* (1951); and Fellini's *I Vitelloni* (1953) and *La Strada* (1954). In contrast to the escapism of glossy Italian and Hollywood movies with their middle class heroes and happy endings, these directors took their cameras to the streets, often used non-actors to show the 'real Italy', and focused especially on the post-war hardships of working class Italians.

One deficiency of this approach, however, is that it generally restricts itself to the external struggles and surroundings of the characters and doesn't sufficiently explore their thoughts and feelings. Nor does it take them out of their environment. Many of these directors were avowedly Marxist and we might suppose that they would issue a call to revolution: Visconti's *La Terra Trema* was funded by the Italian Communist Party, with which he remained affiliated. But Salvador Dalí sneered that Visconti was 'a communist who only liked luxury', and his later films largely focused on the decadence of high society. Fellini was already exploring below the surface of his characters in *La Strada*, a transitional film in which the larger social concerns of humanity are giving way to the treatment of more individual needs.

Another key transitional work is De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*, which is – as the director himself said – a fairy story. He added: "its content is humanist, but its inspiration... is more closely related to the legends of the North, to Andersen for example, than to the reality of our present-day Latin world". An old spinster finds a newborn baby in a cabbage patch in her garden. She raises him and he becomes Totò the Good, the happy man who loves everyone. When she dies, Totò enters an orphanage. At age eighteen, he leaves and finds refuge in a hobo shanty town on the outskirts of Milan.

Totò is penniless but, when he is frustrated in his desire to help people, the old lady, now an angel, gives him a magic dove with the power to work miracles. When oil is found in the shanty town, businessmen take over and the squatters are taken away to prison. But, in a final miracle, and long before *ET*, they grab brooms from street sweepers and ride them off "towards a land where good morning really means good morning". Thus the poor literally rise above their poverty.

I dwell on *Miracle in Milan* because it shares a number of similarities with *Happy as Lazzaro*. The protagonist has distinct affinities with Totò. He is a young, innocent, good person of unknown parentage who lives and works among a band of poor farmers. It is probably the 1990s, and these are overworked sharecroppers who grow tobacco in a rural estate known as Inviolata ('untouched'), which has been cut off from the rest of Italy by a flood. It is a feudal structure lorded

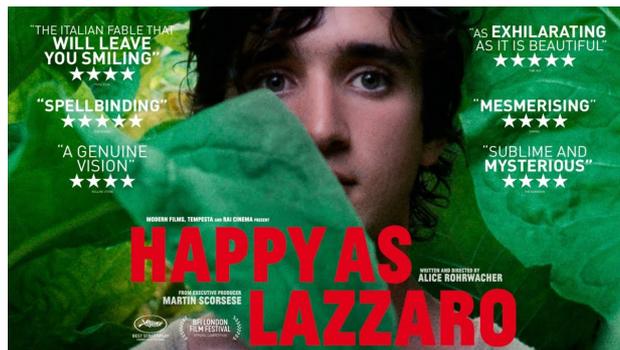
over by the Marchesa Alfonsina De Luna (Nicoletta Braschi) – 'the Queen of Cigarettes' – who appropriates the fruits of the peasants' labour and gives them barely enough to survive.

Lazzaro (Adriano Tardiolo) is continually bullied and ordered about by the other farmers, but he always obliges and never complains. As one critic suggests, he has the beatific smile of a saint in a medieval fresco.

He is happy because he is helping others. The Marchesa sums it up to her son Tancredi (Luca Chikovani): "Human beings are like animals. Set them free and they realise they're slaves, locked in their own misery. Right now they suffer, but they don't know. I exploit them, they exploit that poor man. It's a chain reaction. It can't be stopped".

Tancredi, who is spoilt and manipulative, befriends Lazzaro and persuades him to participate in a plot to fake his own kidnapping. But this brings in the police, who discover the sharecropping, which was made illegal years earlier (1982). The people are then forcibly relocated to the city. Lazzaro, however, has a fever, falls off a cliff, and is presumed dead.

The story then suddenly acquires a large dose of magic realism as Lazzaro, like his biblical namesake or – better still, Rip Van Winkle – reawakens in the present as the fresh-faced young man he was more than two decades earlier. He walks into the city in search of his friends and sees a crowd of workers outbidding each other in a kind of auction by offering their services for less, and driving the wage down. The city is a shoddy artificial metropolis of shopping malls, motorway service areas, railways sidings and collapsed bridges. We are still in a world of gross inequality, poverty and privilege. The difference is that under feudalism man exploited man, whereas under capitalism it is the other way round. —>



Lazzaro finds some of his people living in a water tower and making ends meet by looting and petty theft. He meets Tancredi again, now middle-aged and fallen on hard times after the seizure of his mother's assets. Lazzaro goes to a bank, demanding that they return the money. He is asked if he has a weapon and replies that he has a slingshot that Tancredi gave him years ago. At this point the bank's customers pin him to the floor and beat him savagely, presumably to death. A wolf which had appeared on the scene, then leaves, rushes through traffic and heads towards the camera.

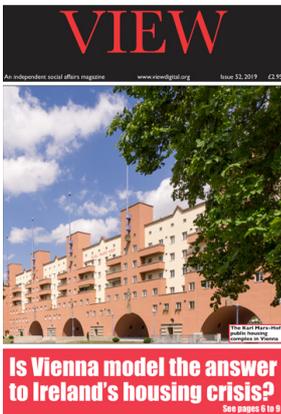
This ending appears to be devastating. The film seems to suggest that we are incapable of seeing and appreciating pure goodness even it is right before our eyes and instead we destroy it. Lazzaro is clearly a Christ-like figure, or Holy Fool. In the Christian story Jesus was too good for the powers of the time and had to be killed. There is also a link in *Happy as Lazzaro* to St Francis: according to the legend, he tamed a wild wolf by promising that it would receive food every day as long as it agreed never to harm again. So if Lazzaro is St Francis, the wolf (who appears and is mentioned earlier) represents the rich and powerful.

This is not to suggest that the film is religious. Near the end the former peasants enter a cathedral to listen to Bach's version of Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity

and cleanse me from my sin; Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me". Ironically, they are shooed out by nuns who inform them that it is a private function. Even the church has abandoned the poor. However, the organ stops but the music leaves the building and, carried on the wind blown by the peasants in unison, follows them out to the street, suggesting perhaps that it is the poor who possess real grace.

Alice Rohrwacher has explained that 'Happy Lazzaro' is a saying in Italy when you see somebody who is poor and therefore has nothing left to lose. So if you see a homeless person who's actually singing and being happy, you say, "Oh look, a happy Lazzaro". Yet happiness alone is not enough. Rohrwacher leaves the moral of the film up to the viewer, but it is clearly a Humanist work which rejects orthodox religion, yet goes further to suggest that individuals, however good, will not by themselves change the world. Christians believe that Jesus changed humanity, but he didn't. The world remained as cruel afterwards as it had been before. Indeed, if anything it became worse when Christians tried to impose their beliefs by force in the Dark Ages. The human spirit will only triumph if there is a collective effort to defeat power and exploitation.

Rohrwacher's movie gem is therefore both humanist and socialist. Goodness must be harnessed to collective action. Then and then only will we all be as happy as Lazzaro. □



View Magazine

Brian Pelan

The founder and editor outlines its social function and range of subjects

VIEW magazine was set up in 2012 in Northern Ireland. Since then we have published 52 magazines – both online and in print form. I am currently working on our 53rd edition which is looking at palliative care issues in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

I am passionate about social affairs and offer a platform to the stories of marginalised people and groups whose voices often go unheard. We have adopted a theme-based approach. Issues that we have covered in-depth, include domestic abuse; suicide prevention; maternal mental health; loneliness; homelessness and housing; and crime and justice.

We have sought at all times to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion are at the heart of our journalism. Every issue has a guest editor who has a deep knowledge of their subject. These have included women equality campaigners and advocates for those with disabilities.

The guest editor of our issue on domestic abuse (https://issuu.com/brianpelanone/docs/view_latest_issue_46_-

[domestic_viol](https://issuu.com/brianpelanone/docs/view_latest_issue_46_-)) was Kelly Andrews, Chief Executive of Belfast-Lisburn Women's Aid. In her editorial, Kelly wrote: "I passionately believe no one should suffer in silence or isolation. We must speak out if we are ever to achieve our vision of eliminating domestic or sexual violence against women and children."

The guest editor of our issue of VIEW which looked at Victims, Survivors and Legacy issues in Northern Ireland (https://issuu.com/brianpelanone/docs/view_issue_51) was Alan McBride who lost his wife and father-in-law in the IRA bombing on the Shankill Road, Belfast, in 1993.

In his editorial, Alan wrote: "I would like to appeal for a different kind of politics. It's time to put the past behind us and to start and deliver the kind of Northern Ireland I and so many people like me voted for in the Good Friday Agreement."

This issue on Victims, Survivors and Legacy was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Foundation.

The type of journalism that we do is effective, I believe, in offering an insight into the lives of those communities who are often not adequately represented in mainstream media. One of my proudest moments was getting a young homeless man to agree to tell his story to us. His image appeared on our front cover - https://issuu.com/brianpelanone/docs/issue_21

The idea of VIEW was conceived at a kitchen table. Today we have more than 10,000 readers. Get in touch with VIEWdigital co-founder Una Murphy at unamurphy@viewdigital.org if you would like to become a VIEWdigital champion and help to fund our social affairs journalism. □