

From *Xáos* to *Kaos*. Pirandello and the Tavianis revisited¹

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In the Taviani brothers' acclaimed 1984 film *Kaos*, six short stories by Luigi Pirandello, Italy's 1936 Nobel Prize winner, find a fascinating cinematic interpretation.² The Tavianis chose such stories that fit their socio-political agenda for the film, that gives voice to the underprivileged and to the adversities resulting from an often insensitive and corrupt system that they must endure. They have nonetheless given these stories an adaptation that is very faithful to Pirandello's concerns, his artistic philosophy as well as his depiction of Sicily and its people.

The reassessment of both film and short stories made it evident that the cinematic medium provides an ideal scene for the promotion of Pirandello's artistic concepts. In what follows, I would like to consider possible points of comparison between the Tavianis' and Pirandello's productions, and the insights that such a comparison provides.

Pirandello and cinema - a short overview

Luigi Pirandello's love-hate relationship with the cinema took many turns over several decades.³ Although the relatively new cinematographic medium threatened to empty the theatre in favour of cinema halls, as time passed Pirandello revealed 'a fertile and sensitive mind willing to consider film as an art form and to evaluate its potential, and shortcomings, in that light'.⁴ Filmmaking relied on machinery, and Pirandello feared filmmaking would incur a dehumanisation of its practitioners.⁵ In his caustic criticism of the mechanized art, Pirandello depicted an amalgamation between a camera operator and his camera, to the point that the cameraman mechanically and immorally

¹ I presented a much shorter version of this essay at the NeMla 50th anniversary convention, Washington DC, 21-24 March 2019.

² Some critics considered the film was only loosely based on Pirandello's stories (J. Maslin, 'Pirandello Tales in the Taviani Brothers' *Kaos*', in: *The New York Times* (13 October 1985)). Others found the Tavianis' adaptation admirable, such as R. Brody, 'A Masterly Movie Adaptation of Short Stories by Luigi Pirandello', in: *The New Yorker* (16 January 2017). See also Umberto Mariani, who considers Pirandello's works 'alive and present', when listing writers and playwrights influenced by them, in: *Living Masks. The Achievement of Pirandello*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2008, p. 104.

³ N. Genovese, 'Quel ragno nero sul treppiedi: analisi dei rapporti tra Pirandello e il cinema', in: N. Genovese & S. Gesù (eds.), *La musa inquietante di Pirandello: il cinema*, Roma, Bonanno Editore, 1990, pp. 14, 30.

⁴ F. Nulf, 'Luigi Pirandello and the Cinema', in: *Film Quarterly*, XXIV, 2 (1970-1971), p. 46.

⁵ S. Micheli, *Pirandello in cinema. Da 'Acciaio' a 'Kaos'*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1989, pp. 19-21. See also Genovese, 'Quel ragno nero sul treppiedi', cit., p. 12.

continues to turn the handle while a tiger devours an actor in front of him, in his prototypical film-novel⁶ *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* (1916).⁷

Pirandello nonetheless embraced the new medium and personally contributed to scripts and adaptations of his works for the cinema. Yet, in 1929, more than a decade after the first publication of *Serafino Gubbio*, and after over a dozen films were made based on his works, he still maintained that ‘the theatre’s illusion of reality’ is greater than that of the cinema. Films could only aspire to become a ‘photographical and mechanical’⁸ copy of the theatre, where live actors spoke with natural voices, since the theatre is the arena in which literary protagonists, conceived in writers’ imagination, can talk. After the introduction of synchronised recorded dialogues in the late 1920s, to Pirandello’s opinion, talking films also produced an irreversible disillusionment in their viewers by breaking the silence. In an effort to find distinctive attributes proper to the cinema, Pirandello conceded that while moving images need not use words, they should rely on music. Films would thereby become truly revolutionary, providing a visible language for music,⁹ and music in turn would be used to express ‘the abstract mental energy that generated images’, a notion he referred to as “cinemelography” [...] or cinematic pictures literally expressing sound that only relies on melody and music’.¹⁰ Pirandello tried to materialize his ideas regarding the centrality of sound to films in *Acciaio* (1933), based on his text *Gioca Pietro!* Although he was not satisfied with the outcome, the film is nevertheless impressive in its use of sound that amplifies the images of monstrous machinery.¹¹

Pirandello understandably focused on the shortcomings of the new art. These were still the early years of the “talkies”, and films were technically wanting. In his effort to demystify the lure of the cinema further, Pirandello claimed talking films would lose their international appeal, since they could only present actors speaking in one language.¹² He could fathom the future use neither of subtitles nor of dubbing, yet it seems that his attack of the cinema, as well as the meagre artistic expression he was willing to relegate to it at this point, was above all a manifestation of his anxiety regarding the future of the theatre.

The ready money the film industry provided was only one reason Pirandello gradually became more engrossed by the cinema. Above all else, it seems Pirandello was attracted to ‘the possibility of a “cinema of ideas” that intrigued him, just as he worked toward a theatre of ideas’.¹³ Despite his vehement defence of the theatre, Pirandello soon realised that ‘the future of dramatic art and also of the playwrights is now there [...] we must direct ourselves towards a new expression of art: the talking

⁶ See G. Moses, ‘Film Theory as Literary Genre in Pirandello and the Film-Novel’, in: *Annali d’italianistica*, VI (1988), p. 38.

⁷ Alessandro Vettori reads in this novel the suggestion that while human beings are ‘fed’ to the machine, which becomes more dangerous than the tiger, they are not annihilated but rather born anew. See A. Vettori, ‘Serafino Gubbio’s Candid Camera’, in: *MLN*, CXIII, 1 (1998), pp. 103, 106.

⁸ L. Pirandello, ‘Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro’, in: L. Pirandello, *Saggi, poesie, scritti varii*, M. Lo Vecchio-Musti (a cura di), Roma, Mondadori, 1960, pp. 998-999 (first printed on *Corriere della Sera* (16 June 1929)). In a letter to Marta Abba of 25 April 1929, Pirandello claimed spoken film cannot hope to supersede the theatre since it ‘wants to be a mechanical and photographic copy of theatre’. See B. Ortolani (ed. and trans.), *Pirandello’s Love Letters to Marta Abba*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 73.

⁹ Pirandello, ‘Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro’, cit., pp. 1001-1002.

¹⁰ N. Davinci Nichols & J. O’Keefe Bazzoni, *Pirandello and Film*, Lincoln-London, Nebraska University Press, 1995, p. 80.

¹¹ E. Comuzio, ‘Cinema, linguaggio visibile della musica: Pirandello nel dibattito sul sonoro (1930-1936)’, in: Genovese & Gesù, *La musa inquietante di Pirandello*, cit., pp. 135-155. Specifically, see Comuzio’s discussion of the film *Acciaio*, *ivi*, pp. 150-152.

¹² Pirandello, ‘Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro’, cit., p. 1000.

¹³ Nulf, ‘Luigi Pirandello and the Cinema’, cit., p. 47.

film. I was against it: I changed my mind'.¹⁴ Pirandello closely followed the innovations and transformations that were taking place in the film industry during his lifetime. As he had written to his muse Marta Abba earlier, 'the devil of an invention of the speaking machine is, after all, very amusing. It all depends on knowing how to use it'.¹⁵

An ideal artistic medium for a relative reality

Undoubtedly, films have since become a most adequate medium for the artistic expression of Pirandello's philosophy. One of the basic tenets of Pirandello's philosophy is that reality is multifaceted and relative, defined by the perception of each consciousness that is exposed to it. He managed to shake his readers' and audience's conviction that the reality they believed themselves to be part of is inherently different from fictional reality. Among many other tactics, he achieved this effect by famously using metaleptic leaps that seemingly allowed fictional characters to interact with live people. Not only did he destabilise his readers' and audience's grasp of the real¹⁶ by letting his characters penetrate their lives in unexpected ways, but he provided the characters with convincing arguments to the superiority of fictional reality over the historical reality we live by. One recalls the Father character in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, who claimed that the characters' reality is more real than that of the actors, based on the ontological difference between them. While all mortals are subjected to change from one moment to the next, and are eventually doomed to die, an artistic creation is immortal.¹⁷ The shape, that defines and contains the essence of a work of art, entraps the artistic creation, yet at the same time safeguards its vibrant, constant life for all time.¹⁸ This is why the plight of the Mother character is most poignant when she insists her agony can never be alleviated since it is performed repeatedly, every time the play is acted out: 'it's happening now. It happens all the time! My anguish is not over, sir! I am alive and present all the time and in every moment of my anguish which renews itself, alive and always present'.¹⁹

Pirandello attempted to endow theatrical art with attributes proper to plastic arts, whose essence is evidently contained in forms such as statues, by endeavouring to make each theatrical performance identical to the previous or following ones. This is one of the reasons he relied on stock characters such as those of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, the director praises actors who could enter their character in the manner of *Commedia* artists and improvise their role according to the blueprint of its fixed characteristics, thereby actualising their parts. Yet even *Commedia* roles must be performed by live actors, who necessarily change

¹⁴ Pirandello's letter to Marta Abba of 27 May 1930, in: Ortolani, *Pirandello's Love Letters to Marta Abba*, cit., pp. 145-146.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 74.

¹⁶ Jorge Borges examines the reason for the readers' 'disquiet' when confronted with a Don Quixote who is himself a reader, or a Hamlet who is a spectator of the play-within-the-play he stages, and concludes that 'such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious'. See J.L. Borges, *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, R.L. Simms (trans.), Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 46.

¹⁷ The Father character tells the *capocomico* that the characters' fictive reality is more real than that of the actors, thereby validating fictive reality while at the same time undermining historical reality: 'if we (*again he indicates himself and the other characters*) have no other reality beyond the illusion, it would be also a good idea for you [the director] not to trust in your own reality, the one you breathe and feel today within yourself, because – like that of yesterday – it is destined to reveal itself as an illusion tomorrow' (L. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays*, M. Musa (trans.), London, Penguin, 1995, pp. 55-56).

¹⁸ Millicent Marcus considers *Kaos* 'as the raw material of the artist who must endow [...] with form', and views the journey of the character of Pirandello to his childhood home in Sicily as a journey into his own psychic chaos. See M. Marcus, *Filmmaking by the Book. Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*, Baltimore-London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 184.

¹⁹ Pirandello, *Six Characters*, cit., p. 51.

from one performance to the next. That is why the cinema seems the most suitable medium in providing an adequate artistic shape to Pirandello's principles. Films can expose many points of view in multifaceted ways particular to this medium, such as providing visual expression to protagonists' thoughts. Additionally, and as opposed to theatre actors, film actors, captured on celluloid, produce the same exact performance every time the film is projected. Like photographs, films freeze time, despite their illusive motion, creating a space within which their contents seem to unravel. Unlike photographs, that freeze a small fraction of time, films can capture a series of frames over a longer period, thus sustaining the illusion that they are life-like, so long they are projected. Films can further allow the actors to see themselves live, in a way that photographs or mirrors cannot, a shortcoming Moscarda explains to Anna Rosa in Pirandello's novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila*.²⁰ Yet films do not resolve the existential schism between the image one has of oneself and the image others have of one. In its operation, a screened film presumably provides the image Moscarda bemoaned he could not access, namely the image "outside of himself", that others had of him. Nonetheless, a film, like a photograph, only enables one to look at the eternally identical fragment of artistic life contained in its form from the outside. It does not enable one to enter it, nor does it allow one to experience life as it is being lived, since human life's perpetual flow, contained in its perishable receptacle of flesh, only stops at death. Even if one were willing to live in front of a circle of mirrors as one is being filmed, such a film would consist of both a freezing mechanism (mirror and celluloid) and a time issue: it would still not happen exactly at the same time as every lived moment does.

Thus, although films actually emphasize the dichotomy between life and art, precisely due to their convincingly lifelike quality, they do present the viewer with an immutable form that mirrors life best, according to Pirandellian philosophy, since they mimic a continuous movement and evolvment over a specific period of time, circumnavigating 'the inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it, immutable)'.²¹ The time of the performance of a film is also similar to that of a theatrical performance, and thus closer to the medium Pirandello originally considered most effective for the staging of real feelings that could stir the audience. Indeed, films constitute the ideal medium for the performance of artistic content trapped in a form while at the same time resembling life to an uncanny degree that gives the viewers a most convincing illusion of real life evolving before their eyes. Films create a continuous flow of experiences that only exists in our consciousness. In this sense, films are the closest in allowing viewers to see the life of an artwork in motion.

Chaos and structure

Turning to *Kaos*, the name of the Tavianis' film is already indicative of their profound understanding not only of Pirandello's artistic notions, but also of his view of Sicily. Immediately after the initial credits, the Tavianis include a quote taken from Pirandello's youth recollections, in which he claims to be 'the son of Caos, not

²⁰ Moscarda tells Anna Rosa her pretty photographs are as dead as her reflection in the mirror, since in order to see oneself live, one must stop living, even if for a moment. Life is in constant motion, and thus one can never really see oneself live, but only be seen by others. See L. Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, Roma, Rusconi, 2009, pp. 129-130.

²¹ L. Pirandello, 'Preface to the 1925 *Six Characters in Search of an Author*', in: idem, *Naked Masks. Five Plays*, E. Bentley (ed.) & E. Storer (trans.), New York, E.P. Dutton, 1952, appendix I, p. 367.

allegorically but in reality'.²² Born in 1867 in the village of Cávusu, as its inhabitants called it, Pirandello specifies this name is a dialectical derivation of the ancient Greek word Xáos.

The film's name, spelled with a "K", hence alludes to the Greek origin of the name. In addition, the quote appears on screen against the background of the Greek temple of Segesta, visually underlining the identity of the early settlers of Sicily.²³ The film will continue in this vein, and in the chosen stories, other "conquerors" of the island, the Bourbons and the post 1861 "Unitarian" Italians, will play their part. Pirandello's irony regarding the name of his native village and the chaotic life its people have been forced to lead because of Sicily's many foreign conquerors thus reverberates not only in his stories but also in the Tavianis' adaptation and visual choices. Indeed, chaos moulds people's character and tinges all their interactions: between a mother and her children, a man and his wife, a master and his workers, between individuals and their community, and with the animals that surround them.

True to the structure of a Greek tragedy, the film uses one story for the prologue and another for the epilogue, providing a unifying structure to four other stories used as episodes in between. The elements contained in the prologue are exemplified and developed in the episodes, and the epilogue provides an additional, philosophical insight, amalgamating the components that led to it. The raven, based on the story 'Il corvo di Mizzaro', that appears in the prologue and again between one episode and the next, allows for a bird's eye-view of the island, and provides a unity of space. The bell the villagers tied to the crows' neck is reminiscent of the chorus that performed between scenes in Greek tragedies. Despite Pirandello's systematic and pointed criticism of the Church, he often introduced the sound of a bell to indicate the presence and role of the community in his works.²⁴ Thus, the raven's bell is an adequate substitute for the chorus, as the representative of the community on stage and a reminder to essential moral values often lacking in the islanders' conduct. Finally, a Greek play would typically be performed in an outdoor amphitheatre, such as the ruins of the ancient theatre the Tavianis invite the character of Pirandello to look at towards the end of the film. In other episodes, the Tavianis adequately toy between the indoor and outdoor settings with a clever bracketing of frame, achieved by the use of a series of open doors or open windows that erases differences between actions, whether these take place inside or outside, thereby creating one spatial sphere that encompasses everyone.

This visual strategy allows foregrounding another important Pirandellian issue the Tavianis investigate, namely the lack of distinction between private and collective life. Everyone knows everything about everybody, and even the seemingly empty

²² Pirandello, *Saggi, poesie, scritti vari*, cit., p. 1281 ('Di che tempi, di che lontananze', a fragment dictated by Pirandello to his friend Pio Spezi first published in: *Nuova Antologia*, Firenze, Fondazione Spadolini, volume CCLXXXIX (serie VII), fasc.1470 (16 June 1933).

²³ Andrea Baldi considers this shot of the temple from above to be devoid of temporal coordinates and thus to suggest a mythical key to the understanding of the movie. See A. Baldi, 'Letteratura e mito in *Kaos*', in: *MLN*, CXIV, 1 (1999), p. 172.

²⁴ For example, Moscarda manages to rid himself of any social attribute, such as his name, his possessions, his social standing, and his ties to other people. Yet in his remote retreat, he can still hear the bells of the nearby town that stress the incapacity of man to detach himself completely from society. See Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, cit., p. 143. Another example is Mattia Pascal, who finds himself outside of normative society, having "killed" both his original identity and his fake identity. In a ludicrous state of estrangement from his selves, he takes both of them for a walk on the street, where he evokes the leaning bell-tower of Pisa. Unlike it, Mattia cannot lean to any of his sides, finally becoming the "late" Mattia Pascal while still alive. This is the only state of being society allows him to keep, and the bell-tower is called to witness his new condition of dead in life. See L. Pirandello, *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, Torino, Einaudi, 1993, pp. 253-254. Regarding the zombie-like punishment of Mattia, see Nourit Melcer-Padon, 'Mattia Pascal's Punitive Mask', in: *Italica*, XCII, 2 (2015), pp. 358-374.

village square in which a protagonist performs on his own, is not empty. As in the climactic scene in their *Fiorile* later on, so already in *Kaos*, the Tavianis use an empty village square where the protagonist agonizes to stage scathing criticism against the entire community, irresponsibly inactive yet present behind closed shutters.

Moreover, the use of a prologue and an epilogue allows to stress the inescapable, circular motion that underlies both the stories' and the film's plot lines. In the prologue, the villagers brandish the eggs discovered in a nest, on which a male raven is sitting, a discovery that provokes not only their laughter and ridicule of the "unmanly" raven, but also the first act of violence shown in the film. The epilogue depicts a dialogue Pirandello conducts with the ghost of his deceased mother. Between these two episodes, from the botched birth of the raven's eggs smashed by the villagers, to the posthumous appearance of the mother's ghost, the life of the various protagonists unfolds. Yet none of them displays anticipation of change as every birth is merely another expected trajectory towards the same kind of life until inevitable death. This circular motion accentuates the protagonists' plight and the sensation of a stifling, inescapable reality.²⁵ Sergio Micheli links the circular motions he detects in *Kaos* to Heidegger's concept of time, stressing that in this movie, the future can only "wish" to be what has already happened. Each phase is part of a succession of events that are in turn part of a present with no foundation for future possibilities.²⁶ In this sense, humans are as much in the grip of their destiny as fictive characters, as incapable of altering their lives, their "form", which is all the more rigid when they are hopeless southerners, without any prospect of bettering their lot. Even the slim, pathetic victory villagers manage to gain against the authorities at the burial of the patriarch in the last episode cannot be upheld as a turning point in the kind of life the islanders must continue to endure.

The inevitable, circular motion is reverberated by the appearances of the moon, especially (but not exclusively) in the second episode of *Kaos*, entitled 'Mal di luna'. The moon, connected to ancient pagan rituals and myths, regulates farming practices, and is part of the numerous superstitions upheld by all the inhabitants of the island, resulting from having to cope with its never-ending ills, and subjected, as they are, to the forces of nature. Superstitions rule, more powerfully than established religion, even though crossing oneself is often used as an antidote to a superstitious fear. One example of empty violence sanctioned by superstition is introduced in the first episode, when the raven and its bell appear above those who are about to leave the island and immigrate to America. In their anxiety to protect themselves from the evil eye, represented by the raven, on such an ominous occasion as the beginning of a long, uncertain voyage, all those present immediately start throwing stones at the black bird. The crowd of people, all dressed in dark clothes, ridiculously gesticulating as they throw stones into the air in the middle of an empty road of a desolate countryside is one of the most grotesque and powerful scenes of the movie. They are repeating the same kind of needless violence the farmers used in the prologue, when they threw the eggs found in the nest at the raven, helplessly held upside-down by its feet. The islanders' superstitious nature sanctions violence, consensually perpetrated by all, and these scenes highlight a facet of their collective responsibility for what occurs in their community. Thus, the ensuing chaos cannot be blamed only on the invading powers nor on misfortunes of geographical or climate conditions. The islanders themselves must take responsibility for the mores they uphold and the actions they perpetrate if any change is to take place.

²⁵ Sergio Micheli considers Pirandellian characters to be devoid of hope and fatally enclosed in cyclical, isolated conditions (Micheli, *Pirandello in cinema*, cit., p. 17).

²⁶ Ivi, p. 41.

The results of chaos

Taking a brief look at the film's episodes, one notices the first one forcefully exposes the results of chaos. This episode, entitled 'The Other Son,' sheds light on repressed memories of untreated trauma, caused by events following Italy's legendary unification in 1861, which, for Sicilians, was clearly an imposition of forces from outside the island. Yet it takes a foreigner, meaningfully a doctor, to get Maria Grazia (or Maragrazia in Pirandello's story) to divulge the horrors she endured during this unstable period. The people of her village either know – and prefer to forget what happened – or they never bothered to find out why she behaves as she does, conveniently labelling her 'crazy' instead.

The doctor manages to wrench Maria Grazia's recollection. One cannot forget the ensuing horrific scene in which a gang of bandits uses its victims' severed heads to get points for rolling them furthest in a morbid game they all partake in, before violating the wife of one of those murdered, and engendering her "other", despised son. This scene is echoed at the end of the episode, when two pumpkins materialize on a stone wall, bright orange against the uniform grey scenery. Maria Grazia takes one pumpkin in her hand, and rolls it behind the back of her "other" son, who is walking away from her, resigned to her constant rejection, to the sound the pumpkin makes on the ground, which is identical to that of the rolling head of his mother's husband. The round heads turned round pumpkins, delineate yet another inescapable vicious circle. Clearly, it is not just Maria Grazia, but the whole community that has not undergone healing, and its injuries are exacerbated by the depletion of the island's inhabitants, on a quest for a better life in America, leaving behind only the women, the young children and the old. Millicent Marcus reads Maria Grazia as emblematic of Sicily, an unnatural motherland 'that cannot hold onto her sons,'²⁷ a land of tears, that loses its sons to the land of gold. Yet Maria Grazia does not give up on her sons in America. The episode ends as it started, as she dictates the same letter she did at its beginning, empowered by the thought that her sons never answered because they never received her letters, and might finally do so now the doctor will write them for her.

Under the Sicilian moon, relationships are as harsh as the landscape. The second episode depicts the cynical use of a husband's temporary lycanthropic derangement by his young bride Sidora; a state she discovers recurs every time the moon is full. Once again, the village square is where the couple's future is decided with the tacit support of the entire village. In her fright, Sidora runs away from the remote farm, back to her mother's house in the village. Her husband Batà follows her there, and patiently awaits her on the square. Finally, a hand provides him with a chair: the villagers support his reunification with his lawfully wedded wife. Yet they also silently support the scheme to make him a cuckold. Prompted by her mother's encouragement, Sidora hopes to turn her husband's infirmity to her favour at his expense. She concludes that the next time the moon is full, Saro, whom she wished to wed before she was forced to marry Batà, will come to the remote farm with her mother to keep her company when she must barricade herself in the house, while Batà howls at the moon outside. According to Pirandello's story, on the fateful night, Saro becomes frightened by Batà's howling and appalled by Sidora's open advances. The story ends with an amused allusion to the moon that gives so much trouble to the husband on one side of the door, while it seems to be laughing at the wife's failed revenge of her unwelcome marriage on the other. The Tavianis accentuate the wife's defeat: on the night in question, while Sidora and Saro are already embracing, it begins to rain and the moon is covered by clouds. Batà, happy to be rid of his monthly trouble, approaches the house where the others took

²⁷ Marcus, *Filmmaking by the Book*, cit., pp. 200-202.

refuge, and looks through the window. Whether the ensuing howling that escapes Batà's throat is a reaction to his discovery of his wife's betrayal or to the movement of the clouds that uncovers the moon again, Saro detaches himself from Sidora, incapable of deceiving a man with such a predicament. Having received no assistance from the Virgin to whom she prayed nor from the elements that rule the island, Sidora ultimately exhibits some compassion towards Batà, but only after she resigns herself to being his wife without so much as the coveted reprieve of one night.²⁸ The Tavianis thus seems more lenient towards their protagonists, providing the meagre closure which Pirandello had denied them.

Commoners and masters

In the third episode of *Kaos*, the moon is also held responsible for the mysterious fracture of the enormous clay jar Don Lolo, a wealthy rural proprietor, fancies he can fill with olive oil after a successful harvest. The jar is proportionate in size not only to Don Lolo's vanity and greed, but also to his disregard of his workers' feelings and well-being. In the fashion of *Commedia dell'Arte*, a theatrical source Pirandello admired and used in many of his works, the maltreated, grotesque servant manages to outwit his master, to the sound of opera buffa-like music. The servant in this case is a "jar-doctor", who performs a surgical procedure, complete with stitches, on the huge, fertile, broken belly of the jar. Unlike the foreign doctor in the first episode, Zi Dima's expertise relies on secret, local traditions. Nonetheless, Don Lolo demands that Zi Dima make "punti", or holes along the fissure through which to sew a string, and reinforce the glue he will apply to the jar. One will never know whether the glue or the "punti" are actually successful enough for the jar to fulfil its purpose, since Zi Dima performs the operation by rebuilding the jar around himself only to discover he is trapped in the jar once it is mended.²⁹ After a heartless juridical deliberation, Don Lolo realizes he must pay Zi Dima for his useless work, but that he can also demand compensation for his goods once Zi Dima breaks the jar to recover his freedom. Unexpectedly, Zi Dima refuses to come out, and stays in the jar as night falls, shortly accompanied by the same music as in the 'Mal di luna' episode, hinting to the upheavals the moon is about to witness once again in people's affairs, as well as to people's folly. Zi Dima gives his salary for mending the jar to the farmhands, who use it to organize a banquet, celebrating their triumph over Don Lolo's frustrated ambitions, while Zi Dima orchestrates everything from his post inside the jar. Popular carnivals allow reversing society's power structure for a limited, predetermined time, thereby releasing subversive feelings that can endanger the social order.³⁰ Similarly, the revelry instigated by Zi Dima only lasts one night of song, dance, food and drink, under the supervision of a full moon. As soon as the night is over, each member of society goes back to her or his accepted place in the social order. Accordingly, the next morning Don Lolo knows he can exert his anger by violently kicking the jar and

²⁸ Sergio Micheli stresses the synchronicity of sound and music achieved in this film, and the use of silence as a sound in the film. He concludes that 'Mal di luna' is the most resolved episode from a cinematographic point of view in its transposition to the screen. See Micheli, *Pirandello in cinema*, cit., pp. 52-54.

²⁹ Alberto Godioli pointed out similarities between Zi Dima's captivity in the "belly" of the jar to Ivan Matveitch's captivity in the belly of a crocodile in Dostoevsky's story by the same name, published in 1865. See A. Godioli, "A new case, one that my lawyer will have to handle!" Dostoevskian Echoes in Pirandello's "La Giara", in: *Incontri*, XXXII, 2 (2017), pp. 59-68.

³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the 'temporary suspension [...] of hierarchical rank' during Carnival time, 'liberating from norms'. See M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, H. Iswolsky (trans.), Bloomington Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 10. Roger Caillois notes carnivals are conducted like a game, 'conforming to pre-established conventions, in an atmosphere and within limits that separate [carnival] from and do not entail any consequences for ordinary life'. See R. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, M. Barash (trans.), Urbana, Illinois University Press, 2001, p. 131.

sending it rolling down the hill, disregarding its occupant, until it hits a tree and breaks again.

Don Lolo's sins are manifold. His pragmatic thinking is simplistic and uncompromising. The jar could perhaps have been mended, had he been willing to trust Zi Dima and his secret glue, and had the latter been wise enough to mend it from outside, rather than become trapped inside it. Yet both Pirandello and the Tavianis relish in stressing absurd situations, which in this case display the paradox whose resolution can only be reached through the breaking of the jar and temporarily disrupting the social order it was made to uphold. The punishment Don Lolo is served is humorous, yet also points to potential chaos in the established stratification due to the masses' grievance and disquiet. The hint of a possible popular uprising remains checked by the general bon vivant-atmosphere and the violence Zi Dima is subjected to. No major social change is birthed when a wobbly Zi Dima emerges from the breakage, yet the rebellion, small and short as it was, will provide many more moments of laughter at Don Lolo's expense, and may lay the ground for a more effective upheaval. Importantly, for any change to occur, the old order must indeed be broken. The episode of the jar, which sounded like a bell when whole, hinting at the impact of its destiny on the entire community, thus enfolds a tangible, potential threat.³¹

The masters of the land are detached from their dependents, whether they live amongst them, as Don Lolo, or far from them, in a fancy town house, as the Baron of Mårgari, the owner of the village by the same name in the fourth episode. The masters are belligerent, enforcing the law and setting its soldiers, who are at their immediate disposal, against the villagers whose only weapon is their tenacity. The villagers' demand for a consecrated cemetery up in their mountain hamlet is met by the Baron's "landlord" kind of superstition: since he has to suffer their existence on his lands so long as they are alive, he refuses to allow them to take root as corpses buried in them. While Pirandello ends this story with an outlandish scene, in which the carabinieri guard the empty tomb already dug up on the mountain to prevent it from being filled with the dying patriarch, the Tavianis aptly utilize the absurdity of the situation but choose to allow the villagers' victory. The soldiers disregard their orders and leave the premises. Their reluctance to interfere with matters related to superstition, religion and sheer humanity is coupled with their sympathy towards the villagers and assisted by the distance from town. One may thus conclude that the evolution that can take place on this island is a stubbornly persistent one, achieved over a very long period by de facto actions on the ground, regardless of the ruling authorities.

The power of fiction

Pirandello often uses intratextual cross-references between his works, and the Tavianis follow suit, introducing elements from one episode in another. Such are the reappearances of the raven mentioned earlier, or the scene when a boy walks his dog holding its two hind legs like a wheel-barrel, a clear reference to 'La carriola', another Pirandellian story that is only alluded to in this way in the film. A more meaningful instance of cross-referencing involves Saro, the failed lover from the second episode, who participates in the epilogue, this time as the coachman who takes Pirandello from the train station and brings him back to his childhood home in Chaos. His reappearance helps complete yet another circular motion in the overall plotline, yet conveys a deeper meaning. Saro recognizes Pirandello, but Pirandello only realizes who the coachman was as he drives away. This part of the story, added by the Tavianis,

³¹ Marcus considers the jar as an egg that allows gestation; once hatched, it provides a rebirth into a life of freedom for the workers. See Marcus, *Filmmaking by the Book*, cit., pp. 189-190. The image is indeed very apt, yet any freedom events depicted in this episode might grant will evidently occur in the distant future, if at all.

indicates their deep understanding not only of Pirandello's artistry and underlying concerns, but also of his philosophy, and his consideration of the relevance and impact of fiction and its superior standing compared to historical reality.

Saro's appearance successfully translates the first half of the story on which the epilogue is based into cinematic language, since he is given the upper hand over his own writer, in similar fashion to Pirandello's story. In this story, entitled 'Colloqui con i personaggi', Pirandello hung a notice on his door, which warned that no audience would be given that day to any fictional character, and any character who considers disturbing him had better direct himself to another writer. Disregarding the warning, a nameless fictional character bursts into the study. Pirandello protests loudly: he is worried about the onset of war, and the fate of his son who has been drafted, and is not free to deal with fiction. Yet the character merely points to beautiful flowers that are blooming on that spring morning and to the soft sounds of a bird's song. Whatever wars men will wage and however horrific the woes they will endure, what will remain, eternally immutable, is what real life is actually made of: those feelings that one was able to give expression to and bring to life in fiction, outside the reach of historical time. The way to do so is by artistic creation, since the life of an artwork is everlasting while that of mortal men is not. Pirandello relents: with whom but with his fictional characters could he possibly conduct any dialogue at such a stressful time?

The second part of the story, as well as the film's epilogue, continues with another dialogue with a fictional character, this time with Pirandello's dead mother. Pirandello claims that the reason he is sad is not because his mother is dead, since he can still imagine her sitting in her chair, as he used to do from afar while she was still alive. What makes him sad is that *she* can no longer think of *him*, or more precisely, as Pirandello writes in the story, she cannot give him a reality, think of him in such a way that he would feel himself alive in her even from afar.³² It is this possibility that has really become impossible with her death. Yet as the story ends, Pirandello looks out of his window at the acacias, and hears his mother's voice whispering to look at things with the eyes of those who can no longer see them. It will give you a memory that will make them more sacred and more beautiful, she adds. Repeating the essence of the argument Pirandello's character voiced, the mother sends Pirandello back to his creative activity, which can reach the most meaningful of realities and is therefore to be found in fiction. The mother has become part of Pirandello's imagination and as such is now on the same ontological plane as his other characters. She now holds a privileged position vis-à-vis the writer, who conducts his creative life guided by his characters.

Artistic devices

Pirandello's multifarious use of cynicism and irony is not lost in *Kaos*. The ironic panoply is indeed quite wide: from a kind of Socratic irony, such as Maria Grazia's supposed madness which covers up a terrible truth, to many instances of verbal irony in 'La giara', or the dramatic irony of Batà's trust in his wife, to the sarcastic bantering Pirandello subjects his characters to. Pirandello uses the resulting gap between overt and covert messages in a way that allows the disclosure of both sides of each argument, as well as a degree of identification and compassion with his many protagonists, however "good" or "bad" they are. The same kind of human understanding is portrayed by the Tavianis' visual juxtapositions. Such for example, is the scene of the father painstakingly descending the mountain with the pitiful corpse of his son, for lack of a burial plot in his village, inversely repeated at the end of the scene of the mock burial

³² See L. Pirandello, 'Colloqui coi personaggi', in L. Lugnani (ed.), *Luigi Pirandello. Tutte le novelle*, volume 3: 1914-1936, Milano, BUR, 2007, p. 191.

of the patriarch. The vivid contrast between the two scenes not only underlines the villagers' justified plight, but also ridicules their stubborn behaviour.

Pirandello's uses of irony and theatricality impregnate his entire oeuvre, whether originally written for the theatre or written in a different genre, as a short story or a novel. These aspects are reverberated throughout the various episodes of the film, perhaps most noticeably in the episode of 'La giara', which Pirandello first published as a short story (1909) and later as a one-act play in Sicilian (1916) and in Italian (1925). The Tavianis masterfully exploited the grotesque characteristics written into the plot by Pirandello, whose works display highly suggestive scenes, replete with psychological insights and symbolism that make them particularly interesting for a visual adaptation. They effectively render Pirandello's noteworthy 'sentimento del contrario'-tenet, presented in his *Umorismo*. This sentiment is experienced when one realizes that the underlying motives that made one laugh are quite different from what one initially understood – and are far from comical.³³ This kind of reversal is apparent in their addition of the last scenes of 'Mal di luna', when the audience is more inclined to pity both Batà and Sidora than to laugh at their lot. Similarly, the scenes depicting the paltry victory of the villagers over the Baron of Màrgari and over Don Lolo are seen with apprehension rather than jubilation. Undoubtedly, various theatrical ingredients the Tavianis found in Pirandello's stories served them well, in their noteworthy production of many cinematic moments that display their exceptional choices of shooting angles and the configuration of key frames, as well as their use of dialogues, of sound and music.³⁴

One particular Pirandellian feature the Tavianis often use are metaleptic leaps, mentioned earlier, as Pirandello famously does in his trilogy *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, *Ciascuno a suo modo* and *Questa notte si recita a soggetto*, among many other texts, which rely on the tension between different kinds of realities in their composition. Gérard Genette defined metalepses as 'the intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narrative into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse [...] [which] produces an effect of estrangement that is either comical [...] or fantastic'.³⁵ Regarding the 'Pirandello manner' of *Sei personaggi* or *Questa notte*, Genette found it to be 'nothing but a vast expansion of metalepsis'.³⁶ As Liviu Lutas points out, Genette's definition 'is still valid' when contemplating this phenomenon in films, and although in films the two worlds transgressed by the metaleptic leaps 'do not necessarily have to be created by a narrator's voice', such leaps are 'all the more effective when the visual mode is used too'.³⁷ The Tavianis already used this device in *Padre padrone* (1977), and do so in

³³ Pirandello famously gave the example of one's laughter at the ridiculous sight of an old woman who puts on exaggerated makeup to look younger, yet this feeling is reversed once one realizes that she is doing so to keep a younger husband interested in her. See L. Pirandello, *L'Umorismo*, Milano, Garzanti, 2017, p. 173.

³⁴ Regarding the theatricality of *Kaos* and its adherence to Pirandellian concepts, see Micheli, *Pirandello in cinema*, cit., pp. 46-49; specifically, he claims the theatrical staging is particularly noticeable in scenes in which the camera assumes the position of the spectator (ivi, p. 49). Chadwick Jenkins reminds us that 'the literal meaning of "persona" is "sounding through" insofar as the actor speaks through', and argues that 'Pirandello also has a developed feeling for the aural, and its logic of reflection: the echo. This is brought out rather well in the short films that compose *Kaos*, a brilliant film by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani'. See C. Jenkins, 'Luigi Pirandello on Film: L'Umorismo and Confronting the Other of the Self', *Pop Matters*, www.popmatters.com/luigi-pirandello-on-film-lumorismo-and-confronting-the-other-of-the-self-2495404199.html (5 June 2023).

³⁵ See G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, J.E. Lewin (trans.), New York, Cornell University Press, [1972] 1980, pp. 234-235.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 235.

³⁷ See L. Lutas, 'Metalepsis in Different Media', in: L. Elleström (ed.), *Beyond Media Borders*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, volume 2, pp. 169, 171 (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49683-8_6). In this

other ways later on, as in *Cesare deve morire* (2012). One of the effects achieved by the introduction of metaleptic leaps is an enhanced participation of the audience, whose own reality suddenly seems to be questioned, invaded as it is by fictional characters that are no longer restrained to their fictional reality. Like Pirandello, the Tavianis use *Kaos* to reach out to their viewers, since the only possible future healing of the society depicted in the movie lies in their hands, in the degree of engagement of the audience and in its receptiveness to the necessity of change. This notion is visually clear in many circular images that pepper the film (the raven's eggs, the heads, the pumpkins) that must be broken, as is the egg-like jar, to make room for a possible alteration of the present social reality – except of course, for the eternal moon.

The Tavianis certainly manage to reconstruct the era and local colour of Pirandello's Sicily, yet they also convey the universal aspect of these tales, ensuring that any audience of any period would feel implicated. Referring to the acceptance of their films abroad, Paolo Taviani said: 'To us, the more provincial a film is, the more international it can become'.³⁸ Pirandello would doubtlessly have identified with this aspect of the Tavianis' films, judging by the international acclaim his own works received, sometimes preceding their reception in Italy. One likes to think Pirandello would have been satisfied with their rendering of his stories, and perhaps he would have found the unbridgeable gap between his vision and the technical possibilities³⁹ available in his days to be less disturbing had he been able to see *Kaos*.

Pirandello's modernity and ground-breaking innovations went hand in hand with his belief that 'only film could go beyond his startling dramatizations of consciousness to convey the act of creation', as Nina Davinci Nichols and Jana O'Keefe Bazzoni point out. They add: 'had Pirandello found a cinematographer equal to the aims he sketched out [...] he would have set films on a course called "experimental" even now'.⁴⁰ Exploring the constantly growing possibilities of modern-day films would probably have been particularly attractive to Pirandello as an exciting development of the film medium, allowing the further expansion of his particular vision of the reality of art.⁴¹ Until such a director accepts the challenge, one can continue to appreciate the filmographic achievements of the Tavianis' *Kaos*, and their particularly faithful interpretation of Pirandello's artistic designs.⁴²

Keywords

Luigi Pirandello, Taviani Brothers, *Kaos*, literature and films, reality and fiction

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respect, a particularly notable instance is Woody Allen's take on *Six Characters* in his *Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985).

³⁸ See D. Ehrenstein, 'Your Own Reality. An interview with Paolo and Vittorio Taviani', in: *Film Quarterly*, XLVII, 4 (1994), p. 5.

³⁹ See Davinci Nichols & O'Keefe Bazzoni, *Pirandello and Film*, cit., p. 82.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 5.

⁴¹ Umberto Mariani points out that Pirandello's originality 'had developed gradually from within a tradition', and adds that he 'made use of traditional theatre (and the world it reflected) to discredit it, just as he used it to demonstrate the validity of the new, experimental, open forms' (Mariani, *Living Masks*, cit., p. 94).

⁴² As Tullio Kesich wrote, *Kaos* is 'a film that achieves the miracle of revealing itself extremely faithful to its roots alongside a faithfulness to the poetic language chosen for the narration. More Pirandello than this one cannot hope for, nor more Taviani than this' [my translation]. See T. Kesich, 'Bizzarra è l'umanità. Maledetta la sua "roba"', in: *La Repubblica* (1 December 1984).

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RIASSUNTO

Da Xáos a Kaos: Pirandello e i Taviani riesaminati

Il saggio discute diversi aspetti relativi alla trasposizione cinematografica di sei novelle di Luigi Pirandello nel film *Kaos* dei fratelli Taviani. La rilevanza dell'argomento emerge dalle posizioni di Pirandello nei confronti del mezzo cinematografico, da costui considerato particolarmente adatto a conferire una forma alla propria filosofia artistica. L'arte, racchiusa in una forma permanente e immutabile, è l'unico modo eterno di esistenza, al contrario di quello temporaneo in cui devono vivere i soli mortali. Di conseguenza, Pirandello sostiene che i personaggi immaginari sono più vivi dei loro modelli in carne ed ossa. Il cinema, e in particolare la produzione dei Taviani, è quindi un mezzo particolarmente pertinente da considerare.

Si esaminano nel presente saggio alcune modalità, dispositivi e Leitmotiv con cui le trasposizioni cinematografiche rappresentano elementi essenziali dei racconti pirandelliani, tra cui la storia stratificata della Sicilia, dall'antica conquista greca all'attuazione dell'unificazione italiana, e il senso lunare del tempo, il cui andamento ciclico sembra poter essere sovvertito soltanto da una rivoluzione che sconvolga l'ordine sociale. Pur rifiutando di dare una raffigurazione manichea della società, nella rappresentazione delle problematiche sociali siciliane sia Pirandello che i fratelli Taviani chiamano il pubblico ad accorgersi della necessità di un cambiamento.