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A MOVIE, A MANIFESTO, TWO APPROACHES OF MAD LOVE

One of the last collective texts issued by the Romanian surrealist Group deals with an original matter: the Italian movie *Malombra*, made in 1942 by Mario Soldati, from a novel by Antonio Fogazzaro.

Mario Soldati is better known as a writer, although he worked in the motion picture industry for a long time. When he goes behind the camera, he doesn't do what people could expect a writer preoccupied with film images would do: he doesn't think in words, but in images. As the visual becomes more important than writing, he doesn't escape the danger of a certain esthetic formalism. The "writer turned film maker in spite of himself" avoided this trap with *Malombra*, because he adapted a very Romanesque story.

Marina, the heroine, re-lives along the movie the life of an ancient lady of the castle, Cecilia, a victim of an adulterous love that was too powerful to end in any other way than death. But, beyond time, there is still the need for revenge. Marina takes that revenge on one descendant of Count Ormengo, Cecilia's killer. And she goes on with her imitation to the end, reiterating the final act: like Cecilia, she kills herself in the *Malombra* ravine. The will to reiterate Cecilia's adventure overwhelms Marina's passion and pushes her to madness and death; from the moment when the ancient model is discovered and internalized, this imitation takes her to the act whose end-result can be nothing else than death.

142

Apart from Marina, there is an imposing male character: the writer Silla, who has initiated Marina into the secrets of her destiny. The author of a novel on reincarnation, he wishes to be the stage director of Marina's doom. First an initiator, then he becomes the lover, later the enemy, and, finally, a victim. He attracts the heroine into the final vertigo, but he does not shun from fol-

lowing in her footsteps, to the other side of the mirror, into madness and suicide.

The surrealist passion for movies often focused on scripts built on a certain degree of passionate Romanticism and classic narrative structures. This is far from the shock produced by images or by their analogy, like in the first movies of Bunuel. The story told by a movie – awaking the emotion and imagination of the spectator – fascinated the surrealists. But it was interesting to them only inasmuch as it exalted mad love and magnified the passage from dream to reality.

Malombra doesn't escape this rule: this movie is filled with a "Romantic mystery made up of mists and hidden feelings,"² in an idyllic landscape of an isolated castle on the shores of Lake Como. Also, motifs of fantastic Romanticism are used: ghosts, dreams, a haunted room, a cursed harpsichord, old yellow letters revealing the truth, the final funerary supper. But there are two elements that are essential to the surrealists: the primacy of desire over social or temporal requirements and the "femme fatale" character.

Malombra is still in tune with the stereotypes of what Ado Kyrrou called "revolutionary Romanticism."³ This genre is based on the progressive contamination of the real by the imaginary. The movie goes along this line in a roundabout way: communication with the past. The "remake" of a previous adventure is founded on the reiteration, far in time but identical, of a dramatic love story. But the movie goes further than fantastic Romanticism, based on the reincarnation of Cecilia in Marina. Rather, it tells the story of the possession of one personality by the desiring discourse of the Other. So, the imaginary totally submits to the double rule of desire and death. To Marina, alienation by de-possession means fidelity to her own desire.

This alliance of contradictory conditions reaches a "certain point" when everything ceases to be perceived as contradictory, the point so much searched for by the surrealists.⁴ And the domination of the conscious mind by the imaginary of another can also be considered "surreal." The theme of the movie also has so many surrealistic overtones, that even Kyrrou, a critic who was as excessive as adamant, emphasized the surrealistic touch of the movie: this is "owing to the power of the expressed passion, to the exaggeration of feelings, to the beauty of its women, [a] surrealist movie without meaning to be so."⁵

Moreover, this movie is based on the central role of the *femme fatale*, an essential character that attracted the surrealists to the world of the motion picture. Remember how the French surrealists worshipped the "revelations" in the appearances of Musidora, Pearl White, Louise Brooks. *Malombra* is centered on the last Italian "diva," the enchantress: Isa Miranda. But this seems far from the time when the surrealists considered certain actresses "the essential stages of knowledge."⁶

That actress was not unanimously recognized like the stars of the past, Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich. Nino Frank, one of the first French movie critics who became interested in Italian cinema, didn't like Miranda, whose

“heavy acting” made *Malombra* ponderous.⁷ And Soldati admitted that she was not a good choice (a choice imposed by the producers):

“*Malombra* is a very modern movie, technically my best film (...) still this isn’t the movie I’d been dreaming about and I believe this is so because of miscasting, the actress is not adequate. This is the greatest pain of my career, it still makes me suffer, even if Visconti said it was a very good movie and that it had marvelous sequences, for instance the scene of the funerary supper at the end.”⁸

Finally, Soldati’s work is not one of those movies incessantly mentioned by French surrealists, like *Nosferatu*, *L’âge d’or*, or *Peter Ibbetson*. Still, *Malombra* is the type of movie that exalts mad love, which the surrealists saw and defended; plus *Peter Ibbetson*, *L’Heure suprême*, *Pandora*. Compared to other movies in this category, *Malombra* distinguishes itself by the transformation of the imaginary into delusion, not into reality, as in *Peter Ibbetson*.

In the surrealist discourse about cinema, *Malombra* seems forgotten, or at least the eulogizing discourse has not worked on this movie the way it has worked on others. But the surrealists only spoke incompletely about this type of movies. The French surrealists have never mentioned the name of the director or of the actors in *Peter Ibbetson*, which remains, however, according to André Breton, “the triumph of surrealist thinking.”⁹

Similarly, the Romanian manifesto makes no mention of the director and the actors, and not even of the movie as an object. To such an extent, that, without the references to the title of the film and without the names of the characters, the manifesto could very well deal with something else than Soldati’s work. The most surprising thing is that the only trace of the comments made by the surrealists about this movie is that of the Romanian group and this is the only trace of their interest in motion pictures.

In 1951, in the last manifesto the French surrealists wrote about cinema, *Voyez – Ne voyez pas*¹⁰ (*Watch – Don’t Watch*), actually a list of directors and movies to see and not to see, *Malombra* is mentioned: it is included in the latter list, those films that “for various reasons are an exception in the work of their authors.” But André Breton and Benjamin Péret never mention it in their writings about cinema.

44

The surrealist discourse on motion pictures is not monolithic, in spite of everything: still in 1951, young surrealists who were movie fans (Robert Benayoun, Georges Goldfayn, Ado Kyrou, Gérard Legrand, etc.) brought life into the magazine called *L’âge du cinéma*, where they wanted to reactivate a surrealist perception of movies. They published there many skeptical texts by the older Breton and Péret, the *Voyez – Ne voyez pas* manifesto, and the manifesto of the Romanian surrealists on *Malombra*.

Five years after the text was written, at a time when the Romanians were totally forgotten in the international geography of surrealism, this publication of the “eulogy” made it possible to discover another surrealist view of

love and motion pictures. And the “representation of absolute love” is instrumental in reminding readers of the extent to which the initial positions of surrealism had been radicalized.

*Translated from French
by Monica VOICULESCU*

NOTES

1. Nino Frank, *Cinéma dell'Arte*, Paris, André Bonne, 1951, p. 148.
2. Ado Kyrrou, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma*, Paris, Ramsey Poche Cinéma, 1985, p. 161.
3. Kyrrou, *idem*.
4. André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, 1930.
5. Kyrrou, *op. cit.*, 113.
6. Kyrrou, *idem*.
7. Nino Frank, *op. cit.*, 147.
8. *A discussion with Jean A. Gili*, 1976, in *Le Cinéma italien*, volume 2, Paris, 10/18, 1982, pp. 76-
7. About this movie, see also “*Sur quelques figures de l'imaginaire*” by Maurice Roelens, *Les Cahiers de la cinématèque, spécial Le cinéma des surréalistes*, Toulouse, 1980, pp. 49-57.
9. André Breton, *L'Amour fou*, 1937.
10. In *L'âge du cinéma, no. 4/5 spécial surréaliste*, August-November, 1951. *Surrealist manifestos and collective statements*, volume 2, Paris, Losfeld, – *Le Terrain vague*, 1982, pp. 114-115.