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# Calvino and Cinema: Revisiting a Difficult Love, in Dialogue with Duccio Chiarini about his Documentary, *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*

(Notes from the Field)

Laura Di Bianco



**Fig. 1.** Poster of the film *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*, directed by Duccio Chiarini, 2023. Courtesy of PanamaFilm.

In the centenary of Italo Calvino’s birth, when scholarly initiatives to celebrate his work and legacy have been proliferating, a reconsideration of Calvino’s relationship with cinema is fitting and necessary. As I delved into relatively recent scholarship on the topic published in Italy, I quickly discovered that, like the title of one of his collections of short stories, Calvino’s relationship with film was “a difficult love.”<sup>1</sup> Arguably one the most cinematic of all Italian writers, and admired by prominent directors of his generation such as Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni,

<sup>1</sup> Calvino’s collection of short stories *Amori difficili* (*Difficult Loves*), published in 1970 by Einaudi, is concerned to a large extent with individuals’ inability to communicate or connect deeply.

Calvino, in spite of being an avid moviegoer for most of his life, claimed to know nothing about cinema and deliberately tried to avoid involvement with the film industry.<sup>2</sup> Yet, beneath his apparently simple disavowal of cinema, Calvino's relationship to the art form was more complex than he made it seem.

As Vito Santoro and Lorenzo Pellizzari have explored, respectively in the monograph *Calvino e il cinema* (2012, *Calvino and Cinema*) and the edited volume *L'avventura di uno spettatore* (2015, *A Spectator's Adventure*), Calvino's engagement with film was limited, but not negligible. The topic, in fact, can be approached from a variety of angles: Calvino as spectator, Calvino as film critic, Calvino as scriptwriter, Calvino adapted for the screen,<sup>3</sup> Calvino as a cinematic writer, and finally, Calvino as muse of directors and visual artists, a territory that is almost impossible to chart.<sup>4</sup> He, nonetheless, liked to depict himself as nothing more than a regular, simple spectator.<sup>5</sup>

In the well-known essay "Autobiografia di uno spettatore" ("A Cinema-Goer's Autobiography"), Calvino recounts that, as a young man growing up before World War II in the provincial town of Sanremo, Liguria, he would go to the movies daily and happily consume dubiously dubbed, black-and-white Hollywood films, as well as French films that, compared to the squicky-clean, almost aseptic American movies, were "grevi d'odori" ("heavy with smells").<sup>6</sup> (Later in his life, he would re-discover the films of his youth at the Cinématèque Française, in Paris.) To an adolescent in search of his place in a world soon to be devastated by the violence of the war, films provided coherent and possibly safe worlds in which to immerse himself, while satisfying "un bisogno di spaesamento" ("a need for disorientation") and providing "distanza" ("distance") from the reality of fascism.<sup>7</sup>

As an adult, he did not love Italian cinema (or at least he declared not to), and especially disliked *commedia all'italiana*, which he found self-indulgent and devoid of any depth even in its attempts to mercilessly satirize the real behavior of Italians. He observed that much Italian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s lacked any "distance" and only inflicted upon the spectator "il senso irreversibile che tutto ci è vicino, ci è stretto, ci è addosso" ("the irreversible feeling that everything is near, tight, right-on top of us").<sup>8</sup> He was, however, intrigued by Spaghetti Westerns, which in his view revealed a lot about Italians through the imaginative appropriation and refashioning of the American Western and its myths.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Lietta Tornabuoni, "Il cinema inesistente: Intervista a Italo Calvino," *La Stampa*, August 23, 1981; reprinted in *L'avventura di uno spettatore: Italo Calvino e il cinema*, ed. Lorenzo Pellizzari (Dublin: Artdigiland, 2015), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Among the most valuable screen adaptations of Calvino's literary works, see "L'avventura di un soldato" ("The Adventure of a Soldier") episode of *L'amore difficile* (1962, "Difficult Love") by Nino Manfredi, *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1970, *The Nonexistent Knight*)—an animated film by Pino Zac—and *L'avventura di un fotografo* (1983, "A Photographer's Adventure"), by Francesco Maselli. For a list of Calvino's works adapted for the screen (six films and one TV drama series) see Lorenzo Pellizzari, "Filmografia Calviniana" in *L'avventura di uno spettatore: Italo Calvino e il cinema*, ed. Lorenzo Pellizzari (Dublin: Artdigiland, 2015), 184–93. The filmography also includes reviews and statements by the directors.

<sup>4</sup> See Roberto Silvestri, "La profezia fantastica," in *L'avventura di uno spettatore*, 146–57.

<sup>5</sup> The volume by Davide Maria Zazzini, *Il cinema per me era tutto il mondo: Italo Calvino spettatore* (Teramo: Galaad Edizioni, 2022) deals specifically with Calvino as moviegoer and spectator.

<sup>6</sup> Italo Calvino, "Autobiografia di uno spettatore," in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falchetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 3:34; "A Cinema-Goer's Autobiography" in *Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Pantheon Books: 1993), 49. Calvino's text was first published in 1974 as a preface, solicited by Fellini himself, to the volume *Federico Fellini. Quattro Film* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Calvino, "Autobiografia di uno spettatore," 27, 41; "A Cinema-Goer's Autobiography," 38, 60. See Lucia Re, "Calvino e il cinema: la voce, lo sguardo, la distanza," *Quaderni di Italianistica* 20, nos. 1–2 (1999): 91–102.

<sup>8</sup> Calvino, "Autobiografia di uno spettatore," 43; Calvino, "A Cinema-Goer's Autobiography," 64.

<sup>9</sup> Calvino, "Autobiografia di uno spettatore," 42–43; Calvino, "A Cinema-Goer's Autobiography," 62–63.

While proclaiming an intellectual disengagement from film, Calvino displayed both a fascination with and a certain disdain for art. As he wrote in his 1955 article “La noia a Venezia” (“Boredom in Venice”), written while he was covering the Venice film festival for *Cinema Nuovo* from August 25 to September 8: “Il cinema è tecnica e baraccone, volgarità e sapienza raffinata, avventura per chi lo fa e chi lo vede” (“Cinema is technique and circus phenomena, vulgarity and refined wisdom, adventure for whomever practices it and whomever watches it”).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, by his own admission, cinema shaped his imagination, before he turned to what he regarded as more serious business: literature. When he decided to live in Paris, where he settled in 1967 with his wife Chichita (also a passionate cinephile), one of the factors that attracted him to the city was the great number of movie theaters and the hundreds of screenings available on any given day.<sup>11</sup>

As a successful writer and editor at the prestigious publisher Einaudi, Calvino interacted with the world of film. In 1965, Antonioni proposed a collaboration to develop the script for *Blow-Up*, adapted from Julio Cortazar’s short story “Las babas del diablo” (1959, “The Devil’s Drive”). Calvino, who was at the time busy completing one of his most imaginatively powerful and innovative works, *Le cosmicomiche* (1965, *The Cosmicomics*), graciously turned down the invitation. In a letter typewritten on Einaudi’s letterhead of which I received a digital copy from the Antonioni archive in Ferrara, he wrote: “Potrebbe essere anche una bellissima cosa per me, ma non in un momento in cui sono immerso in un lavoro d’invenzione molto diverso (una serie di racconti che rappresentano un esperimento nuovo e richiedono una concentrazione in una certa logica). Se passo i pomeriggi da te pensando alla sceneggiatura, torno a casa e non riesco più a entrare in quell’altro clima” (“This could certainly be an exciting venture for me, but not at a time when I am immersed in creative work of a very different kind [a series of short stories that consist in a new experiment and requires a focus on a specific logic] If I spend my afternoons working with you on the screenplay, I’ll get back home and won’t be able to return to that other atmosphere”).<sup>12</sup> Despite claiming not having any special perspective to share, he did give Antonioni precious suggestions to enhance the mystery of the story.

Antonioni continued to court him. Another epistolary exchange (this time in hard-to-read handwriting) proves that in 1971 Calvino had agreed to collaborate on *Tecnicamente dolce*, a film project about the unbalanced relationship between humans and the natural environment. The film, unfortunately, was scrapped at a very advanced stage of production.<sup>13</sup>

Stories about other unmade films are part of Calvino’s difficult love for cinema. Santoro reports that Calvino’s masterpiece, *Le città invisibili* (1972, *Invisible Cities*), was initially conceived as a script, “Marco Polo,” which was never turned into a film; the same happened for *Fiabe italiane* (1956, *Italian Folktales*), which, supposedly, Calvino had entrusted to Federico Fellini for a screen adaptation.<sup>14</sup> All to say that Calvino was reluctant to put his pen to the service of cinema, but even when he agreed to do so, something went wrong.

Finally, in 1981, a few years before his premature death, Calvino agreed to be part of the jury for the International Film Festival of Venice. Asked in an interview by film critic Lietta

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<sup>10</sup> Italo Calvino, “La noia a Venezia,” in *Saggi*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 2:1907. This article was originally published in *Cinema Nuovo* 65, August 25, 1955. 133–4. My translation.

<sup>11</sup> Fabio Gambaro, *Lo scoiattolo sulla Senna: l’avventura di Calvino a Parigi* (Rome: Feltrinelli, 2023), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Italo Calvino, Letter to Michelangelo Antonioni, Turin, September 25, 1965, Fondazione Ferrara Arte, Archivio Antonioni. My translation. David Forgacs refers to this letter exchange in his essay “Blow-Up in Details,” *The Criterion Collection*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4478-blow-up-in-the-details>.

<sup>13</sup> Italo Calvino, Letter to Michelangelo Antonioni, Paris, April 14, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> Vito Santoro, *Calvino e il cinema* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), 11; Italo Calvino, “Marco Polo,” *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falchetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 3:509–86.

Tornabuoni if he loved going to the cinema, Calvino answered that he had long lost the habit of his Ligurian and Parisian years. He proclaimed with his usual understated irony: “Credo che mi abbiano invitato nella giuria della Mostra di Venezia perché non so niente di cinema, perché sul cinema non ho mai teorizzato” (“I believe I have been invited to be part of the jury of the Venice Film Festival because I don’t know anything about cinema, because I have never theorized on film”). He continued: “Detesto i libri con la sceneggiature dei film: sarebbero interessanti solo se offrissero tutte le varie fasi attraverso cui passa una sceneggiatura, tutte le successive riscritture di una scena o di un dialogo, tutti i tagli, gli scarti, le rinunce, le parole che non sono diventate immagini, quello che non è mai stato girato” (“I hate books that include film scripts: they would be interesting only if they offered a sense of all the various stages which a script goes through, all the various versions of a scene or a dialogue, the cuts, the wasted scenes, the sacrifices, the words that did not become images, what was never shot”).<sup>15</sup> Thus, while restating his apparent disinterest for film, he let slip a fascination with the filmmaking process.

Despite Calvino’s difficult love for cinema, he had a great impact on generations of Italian filmmakers, and his work continues to shape their vision. Duccio Chiarini, whose work I came across while researching the subject of Calvino and film, is one of them. Indeed, Chiarini nurtured himself with Calvino’s works before turning to filmmaking. He told me, “Da ragazzo ho letto molto Calvino. Più tardi, quando da adolescente ho letto *Eremita a Parigi* ho avuto una vera epifania, perché crescendo mi ero spesso sentito frustrato per la dimensione provinciale della mia città. Sognavo di perdermi nelle grandi metropoli, e quindi accadeva spesso che mi ritrovassi nelle pagine di Calvino” (“As a boy I read a lot of Calvino. Later, during my adolescence, *Eremita a Parigi* [1994, *Hermit in Paris*] was quite an epiphany. As a teenager, I was very frustrated with the provincial dimensions of my town. I dreamed of getting lost in the big metropolis, therefore I often found myself in Calvino’s pages”).<sup>16</sup>

Chiarini’s first feature film *L’ospite* (2018, *The Guest*), a bittersweet comedy about relationships and sentimental crises, is, in fact, filled with literary references and homages to Calvino.<sup>17</sup> The protagonist, Guido, is a struggling academic, a Calvino scholar, who goes through a life-changing breakup. Traces of *Il barone rampante* (1957, *The Baron in the Trees*), *Marcavaldo* (1963, *Marcavaldo, or the Seasons in the City*), *Palomar* (1983, *Mr. Palomar*), and most of all, *Gli amori difficili* (1970, *Difficult Loves*) can be detected throughout the film. Moreover, in a self-reflexive scene in which the protagonist looks at some archival material, Calvino appears on the screen and speaks about visibility. Undoubtedly, he is the tutelary deity of the film. And now, a few years after *L’ospite*, Chiarini had embarked upon a film project about Calvino himself.

Hoping to gain insight into the thought process behind the film, while exploring Calvino’s relation to cinema from a novel angle, I established a dialogue with Chiarini on his evolving project. We discussed how Calvino’s works became part of his imagination and how they can be found in the background of his own stories, even when apparently unrelated, as in his documentary filmmaking practice and the use of found footage. We then focused on the practical aspects of making a film on Calvino: its challenges, the demands of the producers, the overwhelmingly multiple, possible approaches to framing a portrait of a prolific, polyhedric writer and cultural icon like Calvino. We shared the excitement of precious discoveries in the archive, and the trepidation

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<sup>15</sup> Tornabuoni, “Il cinema inesistente,” 175. My translation.

<sup>16</sup> Duccio Chiarini, interview and translation by Laura Di Bianco, November 22, 2022, via Zoom. All of Chiarini’s subsequent quotations from this section derive from this interview.

<sup>17</sup> Chiarini has directed two compelling documentary films on his family history—*Hit the road, Nonna* (2012), and *L’occhio di vetro* (2020, *The Glass Eye*).

of it all “becoming” a film, his film, initially titled “Il volo di Italo” (“Italo’s Flight”) and eventually released as *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi (Italo Calvino: The Writer in the Trees)* at the Venice Film Festival in September 2023.

Some of the questions both Chiarini and I had initially pondered: what will end up on the screen? How will creative impulses and material conditions, production demands, and other material contingencies, shape this film? What will end up on the cutting room floor, or remain on paper, or remain just in the filmmaker’s mind? Calvino, who after all *did* theorize on film in one of his most famous lectures, “Visibilità” (“Visibility”), evocatively defined a film as a metamorphosis with material and abstract stages: “In questo processo il cinema mentale dell’immaginazione ha una funzione non meno importante di quella delle fasi di realizzazione effettiva delle sequenze come verranno registrate dalla camera e poi montate in moviola” (“In this process, the role of the imagination’s *mental cinema* is no less vital than that of the stages of actual production of the sequences as they are recorded by the camera and then edited on the Moviola”).<sup>18</sup>

When I conducted the interview, “Il volo di Italo” was about to enter the production stage. When I asked for Chiarini’s approval to publish this interview, he said: “You’re taking a picture of something in movement,” as if to say that his ideas about the film had changed, and his adventure as a filmmaker had taken other turns.

### **A Conversation with Duccio Chiarini**

**LDB:** Duccio, stai facendo un film su Italo Calvino. Deve essere emozionante e forse spaventoso confrontarsi con un tale titano della cultura italiana e produrre qualcosa che sia coinvolgente ed esteticamente accattivante. In assenza dello scrittore, dovrai inventare delle strategie narrative per evitare le tradizionali interviste con le “talking heads.” Qual è lo scopo del tuo documentario? Qual è il tuo approccio?

(Duccio, you’re making a film on Italo Calvino. It must be exciting and perhaps overwhelming to deal with a titan of Italian culture and create something engaging and aesthetically captivating. In the absence of the writer, you must come up with a narrative strategy to avoid the traditional interviews with talking heads. What is the purpose of your documentary film? What is your approach?)

**DC:** Non mi preoccupa avere a che fare con un mostro sacro della cultura italiana. In effetti, è più impegnativo realizzare il ritratto di un personaggio letterario che, per esempio, quello di un musicista o di un regista. Ho intenzione di lavorare molto con l’archivio. Ciò significa utilizzare pochissime “talking heads.” Voglio che Calvino sia raccontato da Calvino, attraverso interviste radiofoniche e televisive. Ma devo dire che il modo di parlare di Calvino è abbastanza ingestibile. Si esprime lentamente e talvolta con esitazione. Dopotutto, uno come Calvino può permettersi di prendersi tutto il tempo che vuole per dire quello che vuole dire!

(I’m not worried about dealing with a sacred monster of Italian culture. Indeed, portraying a literary character is more challenging than, say, a musician or a director. I intend to use a lot of

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<sup>18</sup> Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Mondadori, 2019), 85. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*. Trans. by Geoff Brock (Boston: Mariner Books, 2016), 102.

archival work. That means very few talking heads. I want Calvino to be told by Calvino, through radio and TV interviews. But I must say that Calvino's way of speaking is not easy to process. He expresses himself slowly and sometimes hesitantly. After all, someone like Calvino can afford to take all the time he wants to say what he wants to say!

**LDB:** Puoi raccontarmi come ti è stato affidato questo progetto e come lo stai sviluppando? Hai già lavorato su diverse versioni del soggetto?

(Can you tell me how you were entrusted with this project, and how it is evolving? Have you already gone through several versions of the treatment?)

**DC:** A giugno di quest'anno [2022], ho ricevuto una telefonata dal produttore di Panama Film, Francesco Siciliano, il quale mi chiedeva se fossi interessato a questo progetto. Poco dopo mi sono stati presentati i membri del "Laboratorio Calvino," i ricercatori Giulio Ciancamerla e Francesca Rubini. Questi, a loro volta, mi hanno presentato Luca Marighetti, uno studioso di Calvino, nonché una persona di fiducia della famiglia di Calvino.

Inizialmente il produttore mi ha incoraggiato a lavorare in completa libertà; quindi, ho iniziato a scrivere un documentario su Calvino dal punto di vista dei lettori. Poi Arté [la rete televisiva franco-tedesca] si è unita al progetto e loro mi hanno dato altri input. Il film che avevo in mente era diverso da quello che volevano. Ho scritto e riscritto il soggetto tre volte..."

(In June of this year [2022], I received a call from Francesco Siciliano, a producer from Panama Film, asking if I was interested in this project. A little later, I was introduced to the members of "Laboratorio Calvino," researchers Giulio Ciancamerla and Francesca Rubini. They, in turn, introduced me to Luca Marighetti, a scholar of Calvino and someone trusted by Calvino's family.

Initially, the producer encouraged me to work in complete freedom, so I started writing a documentary about Calvino as seen by readers. Then Arté [the Franco-German television network] joined the project, and they gave me different input. The film I had in mind was different from what they wanted. I wrote and rewrote the treatment three times..."

**LDB:** Lasciando da parte ciò che vuole il produttore, qual è la domanda che hai in mente?

(Aside from what the producer wants, what is the question you have in mind?)

**DC:** Cosa resta di Calvino? Non c'è quasi nulla di lui nei luoghi in cui ha vissuto, ma è rimasto tanto di lui nella mente delle persone. Ho immaginato un viaggio attraverso quegli spazi, accompagnato dalle voci dei lettori. A Torino vorrei parlare con chi lo ha conosciuto in Einaudi, ma anche con gli insegnanti, che potrebbero raccontarmi dell'importanza di insegnare ai ragazzi la trilogia (*I nostri antenati*). Spero di riuscire a mantenere alcune di queste idee nel nuovo soggetto, magari ricontestualizzandole. Il centro rimarrà. Mi piacerebbe parlare con scrittori contemporanei, non solo italiani, e alternare momenti di ricostruzione storica al presente per vedere appunto cosa resta di Calvino oggi.

(What's left of Calvino? There is almost nothing left of him in the places where he lived, but there is so much of him in people's minds. I imagine a journey through those spaces accompanied by the voices of readers. In Turin, I would like to speak with those at Einaudi who knew him, but also with teachers, who might tell me about the importance of teaching kids the trilogy (*I nostri antenati*). I hope I'll be able to keep some of these ideas in the new treatment, maybe recontextualizing them. The center will remain. I'd like to talk with contemporary writers, not only Italian, and alternate between moments of historical reconstruction and the present to see what remains of Calvino these days.)

**LDB:** E in cosa consiste il nuovo soggetto?

(And what is the new treatment about?)

**DC:** Riguarda l'intellettuale e il suo tempo. *Il barone rampante* fornisce l'impalcatura. In sostanza, utilizzo la storia del giovane barone Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò—che un giorno salì su un albero e non scese più—per esemplificare il rapporto tra l'autore, la sua opera e il contesto politico e sociale in cui è stata realizzata. Come è noto, nell'estate del 1957, dopo la violenta repressione di un'insurrezione pacifica a Budapest, Calvino lasciò il Partito Comunista al quale era iscritto dal 1944. Nello stesso anno scrisse *Il barone rampante*. Naturalmente, molti critici hanno visto una forte connessione tra l'allontanamento di Calvino dalla politica e la scelta del suo personaggio di vivere in cima agli alberi, guardando il mondo da una prospettiva particolare.

(It is about the intellectual and his times. *Il barone rampante* provides the framework. Basically, I use the story of the young Baron Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, who one day climbed a tree and never came down, to exemplify the relationship between the author, his work, and the political and social context in which it was created. As is well-known, in the summer of 1957, after the violent repression of a peaceful uprising in Budapest, Calvino left the Communist Party, which he had been a member of since 1944. That same year, he wrote *Il barone rampante*. Naturally, many critics saw a strong connection between Calvino's distancing himself from politics and his character's choice of living on top of trees, looking at the world from a peculiar perspective.)

**LDB:** Come immagini adesso la struttura del film?

(How do you currently imagine the structure of the film?)

**DC:** Penso saranno tre segmenti: il primo è il suo rifiuto del piatto di lumache, che rappresenta il Calvino "spirito libero" che cresce nella casa di due agronomi. Il secondo è la vita sugli alberi: la rinuncia all'iscrizione al PCI nel 1957 e la libertà che deriva da quel gesto: continuare a impegnarsi nella società, ma al di fuori del Partito Comunista. Nel 1957 Calvino si recò negli Stati Uniti. Rimase incantato da New York e osservava la città dalle finestre del suo appartamento nel Greenwich Village. Questo periodo coincide con *Marcovaldo*, l'umile eroe metropolitano. Poi nel 1967 si trasferisce a Parigi, dove vive con la moglie Esther Singer e i figli Marcelo e Giovanna.

Nel 1968, quando la città conobbe una rivoluzione politica e culturale, suo figlio Marcelo fu arrestato nel Quartiere Latino e imprigionato. Ci sarà quindi New York, la scoperta del nuovo mondo, così come Parigi attraverso gli occhi del figlio Marcelo.

E infine la terza fase, quando Cosimo vola sul dirigibile. Cioè la terra vista dallo spazio. Questa tappa coincide con *Palomar* e con le *Lezioni americane*. Roma fu la sua ultima città. Abitava in un appartamento in Campo Marzio, con una terrazza-giardino sui tetti di Roma. Ho cercato una cornice che contenesse la storia senza comprimerla! Questo mi permette di trasmettere molto. Ora mi sto immergendo negli archivi, bilanciando l'archivio privato e quello pubblico.

(I think there will be three segments: the first one consists of his rejection of a plate of escargot, which symbolizes the “free-spirited” Calvino who grew up in the house of two agronomists. Second, life in the trees—the renunciation of his PCI [Italian Communist Party] membership in 1957 and the freedom that came from that gesture: continuing to be engaged in society, but from outside the Communist Party. In 1957, Calvino traveled to the United States. He was fascinated by New York and would observe the city from the windows of his apartment in Greenwich Village. This period coincides with *Marcovaldo*, the humble urban hero. Then, in 1967, he moved to Paris, where he lived with his wife Esther Singer and his children Marcelo and Giovanna. In 1968, when the city experienced a political and cultural revolution, his stepson Marcelo was arrested in the Latin Quarter and imprisoned. So, there will be New York, the discovery of the new world, as well as Paris through the eyes of his stepson Marcelo.

And finally, the third phase, when Cosimo flies on the airship. That is, earth seen from space. This stage coincides with *Palomar* and with *Lezioni americane*. Rome was his last city. He lived in an apartment in Campo Marzio with a terrace overlooking the city's rooftops. I searched for a framework to contain the story without restricting it! This framework allows me to convey a lot. Now I'm immersing myself in the archives, alternating between the private and the public.)

**LDB:** Nei tuoi film documentari—*Hit the road*, *Nonna* e *L'occhio di vetro*—investighi la storia della tua famiglia attraverso il metodo del *found footage*, ovvero intrecci filmati familiari, foto, lettere e diari, ma anche materiale d'archivio che illustra memorie collettive. Pensi di utilizzare lo stesso metodo per il film su Calvino?

(In your documentary films—*Hit the Road*, *Nonna*, and *L'occhio di vetro*—you explore your family history through found footage like family home movies, photos, letters, and diaries, but also through archival material that presents collective memories. Are you planning on using the same method in your film on Calvino?)

**DC:** Assolutamente! Possiamo contare su un ricco archivio personale con materiale inedito. Vorrei amplificare la loro materialità e lavorare con la grafica o a delle animazioni che creino uno stile visivamente accattivante. Fra il materiale d'archivio più prezioso ci sono i filmati amatoriali della famiglia Calvino. Sono Pathé-Baby, film degli anni '20 girati a Villa Meridiana a Sanremo, con Italo e il fratello Floriano. A quanto pare, nessuno ha ancora mai guardato questi filmati amatoriali.

(Absolutely! We have access to a rich personal archive that includes unseen material. I would like to enhance its materiality and work with graphics or animation to create a visually enticing style.

Among the most precious archival materials are the Calvino family's home movies. They were shot with a Pathé-Baby from the 1920s, in Villa Meridiana in Sanremo, and they show Italo and his brother Floriano. Apparently, nobody's ever watched these home movies.)

**LDB:** Sono stati scoperti di recente?

(Were they recently discovered?)

**DC:** Qualche anno dopo la morte di Calvino, quando lo studio di Campo di Marzio fu trasportato alla Biblioteca Nazionale, gli archivisti ritrovarono in un armadio trenta bobine di Pathé-Baby. Suppongo che da scienziato il padre di Calvino avesse il suo proiettore e avesse ordinato le bobine dalla Francia. Tra queste bobine c'erano alcuni filmati amatoriali. Sulla scatola c'è scritto "Italo e Floriano, Sanremo 1928". Immagino che vedremo Italo e suo fratello da bambini correre per Villa Meridiana. Finora, in attesa dell'approvazione dello schema narrativo, la mia unica preoccupazione è stata ottenere il permesso di dar vita a questi filmati familiari. Non è stato facile.

(A few years after Calvino's death, when the studio of Campo di Marzio was transported to the National Library, the archivists found thirty reels of Pathé-Baby in a closet. I suppose that Calvino's father, as a scientist, had his own projector and ordered the Pathé from France. Among these reels were some home movies. A note on the box reads: "Italo and Floriano, Sanremo 1928." I guess we'll see Italo and his brother as children, running around Villa Meridiana. My main concern, as I waited for approval of the narrative scheme, was to obtain permission to bring these family movies to light. It was not easy.)

**LDB:** Nei tuoi film di solito metti in scena la fase di ricerca in modo diretto, ce la racconti tu stesso. Anche in questo film ti troveremo davanti alla telecamera?

(In your films, you usually portray the research process very openly—you guide us through it. Will you be in front of the camera in this film too?)

**DC:** Non sono sicuro se in questo film ci sarò. Da una parte sono propenso a farlo come negli altri miei documentari, ma questo progetto è diverso da qualsiasi cosa che abbia fatto finora. Posso dirti che l'altra settimana avrei voluto filmare il mio viaggio verso l'*Home Movies* di Bologna, l'Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia, dove questi filmati amatoriali della famiglia Calvino verranno digitalizzati. È stato come trasportare il Santo Graal!

(I am not sure I will be in this film. I'm inclined to be, like in my other documentaries, but this project is different from everything else I have done so far. I can tell you I certainly wish I had filmed my trip, last week, to Bologna's *Home Movies*, the National Archive of family films, where Calvino's home movies will be digitized. It was like transporting the Holy Grail!)

**LDB:** Oltre all'archivio privato sono sicura che ci siano delle chicche anche in quello pubblico. Penso alle numerose apparizioni di Calvino in TV.

(In addition to the private archive, I'm sure there are gems in the public one too. I'm thinking of Calvino's numerous TV appearances.)

**DC:** Sì, per esempio in un film documentario del 1970 per TF1 vediamo Calvino nei cantieri di Les Halles a Parigi mentre parla con un archeologo che sta esaminando i resti di una famiglia del IV secolo d.C. Non a caso in quel periodo si interessò di archeologia.<sup>19</sup>

(Yes, for instance, in a 1970 documentary film made for TF1 we see Calvino at the construction sites of Les Halles in Paris, speaking with an archeologist who is examining the remains of a family from the fourth century CE. Not coincidentally, he was interested in archeology during that period.)

**LDB:** Nella lezione sulla "Visibilità," Calvino descrive il suo processo di scrittura come un movimento dall'immagine carica di significato alla parola scritta. In quanto regista di documentari, ti immedesimi in questo processo? C'è un'immagine che ha generato il tuo film su Calvino?

(In his memo "Visibility," Calvino describes his writing process as a movement from an image charged with meaning to the written word. Does this process resonate with you as a documentary filmmaker? Is there an image that generated your film on Calvino?)

**DC:** Penso alla scomparsa di Ombrosa, il luogo ispirato a Villa Meridiana a Sanremo dove Calvino trascorse la sua infanzia, nel finale de *Il barone rampante*. Ombrosa è legata all'atto di scrivere e a ciò che giunge al termine. Di tutti i luoghi in cui visse Calvino, non c'è quasi alcuna traccia del suo passaggio. Villa Meridiana a Sanremo è un condominio residenziale ora; dei luoghi in cui Calvino visse a Parigi non è rimasta alcuna traccia. E che dire della casa di Roccamare dove trascorreva le estati e dove morì? Mi domando dove, a ormai cento anni dalla sua nascita, si possa trovare Calvino... Di sicuro è nelle migliaia di pagine che ha scritto, e negli occhi, nella testa e nel cuore dei suoi lettori.

(I'm thinking of the disappearance of Ombrosa at the end of *Il barone rampante*. The place was inspired by Villa Meridiana in Sanremo, where Calvino spent his childhood. Ombrosa is related to the act of writing as well as the conclusion of things. In all the places where Calvino lived, there are very few, if any, traces of his time there. Villa Meridiana in Sanremo is a residential apartment building now; there's no trace of Calvino in the places where he lived in Paris. And what can I say about the house in Roccamare where he spent his summers, and where he died? I wonder, one

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<sup>19</sup> Chiarini is referring to *Italo Calvino: Un uomo invisibile (Italo Calvino: An Invisible Man)*, a 28-minute documentary shot in Paris in 1974, directed by Nereo Rapetti. The film, produced by the Italian Swiss Television, contains a long interview of Calvino with journalist Valerio Riva. Calvino's answers were edited by Calvino himself and published as *Eremita a Parigi (Hermit in Paris)*. See Italo Calvino, *Eremita a Parigi: Pagine Autobiografiche* (Milano: Mondadori, 1994), 174–82.

hundred years from his birth, where we can find Calvino... He is certainly in the thousands of pages he wrote, and in the eyes, minds, and hearts of his readers.)

**LDB:** Pensi a qualche lettore in particolare?

(Do you have a particular reader in mind?)

**DC:** Spero di intervistare il botanico Stefano Mancuso che si è nutrito dei libri di Calvino e potrebbe essere la persona ideale per spiegare come la botanica abbia influenzato lo sguardo di Calvino; l'astronauta Samantha Cristoforetti, che ha portato *Palomar* con sé nello Spazio; e forse Alice Rohrwacher, regista attenta ai cambiamenti del paesaggio e all'industrializzazione e la cui visione è stata influenzata dai libri di Calvino.

(I hope to interview Stefano Mancuso, a botanist who immersed himself in Calvino's work and who might be the ideal person to explain how botany influenced Calvino's gaze; Samantha Cristoforetti, the astronaut who took *Palomar* with her into space; and perhaps Alice Rohrwacher, a director particularly attentive to changing landscapes and the effects of industrialization, whose vision has been influenced by Calvino's books.)

**LDB:** Sono completamente d'accordo con te, certamente vedo Calvino in *Corpo celeste*, ma anche in *Lazzaro felice*. Negli appunti della sesta delle Norton Lectures, "Coerenza," Calvino scrive di una delle più grandi sfide per un narratore: iniziare e finire una storia. "L'inizio," scrive, "è l'allontanare da sé la molteplicità delle storie possibili... l'ingresso in un mondo completamente diverso."<sup>20</sup> E il finale può essere autoriflessivo e, come per *Il barone rampante*, cosmico, indeterminato. Condividi questa ansia di iniziare e finire una storia? Come inizierà questo film?

(I completely agree with you; I can see Calvino in *Corpo celeste*, but also in *Lazzaro felice*. In the notes for his sixth memo, "Consistency," Calvino writes about one of the greatest challenges for a storyteller: to begin and to end a story. "The beginning," he writes, "is the departure from multiple possibilities, the entrance in a completely different world."<sup>21</sup> And the ending can be self-reflexive and, as in *Il barone rampante*, cosmic, indeterminate. Do you share this anxiety of beginning and ending a story? How will this film start?)

**DC:** Come ho accennato, una delle cose che voglio indagare è ciò che resta di Calvino negli spazi in cui visse. Lo studio in cui Calvino scriveva è ora conservato presso la Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma. Quindi forse inizierò da lì. Vorrei vedere lo studio quando la biblioteca è chiusa, la mattina presto, e osservarlo con una specie di sguardo alla Palomar, i tre banchi, i quadri alle pareti, i libri che magari avrà consultato...

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<sup>20</sup> Calvino, *Lezioni americane*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. My translation.

(As I mentioned, one of the things I want to investigate is what remains of Calvino in the places where he lived. The office where Calvino wrote is now preserved at the National Library in Rome. So, maybe I will start from there. I would like to see the studio when the library is closed, early in the morning, and observe it with a sort of Palomar-like gaze, the three desks, the pictures on the walls, the books he might have consulted...)

**LDB:** E da lì dove andiamo? Qual è la geografia del film?

(And where do we go from there? What is the geography of the film?)

**DC:** Da Sanremo a Torino, da New York a Parigi, Roma e infine Roccamare, in Toscana. Filmeremo i luoghi cercando le tracce della sua ispirazione. E sarà proprio Calvino a guidarci attraverso i mondi creati nei suoi libri.

(From Sanremo to Turin, New York to Paris and Rome, and finally Roccamare, in Tuscany. We'll film these places and search for the traces of his inspiration. And it will be Calvino himself who will guide us through the worlds created in his books.)

**LDB:** E come concluderesti questo viaggio?

(And how would you end this journey?)

**DC:** Magari con le parole di Calvino. Quando gli è stato chiesto di dare tre suggerimenti per il nuovo millennio, ha risposto: "Fare i calcoli su carta; imparare poesie a memoria; combattere il linguaggio astratto utilizzando parole precise; sapere che tutto ciò che abbiamo può esserci tolto da un momento all'altro." Quando penso a Calvino la prima cosa che mi viene in mente è il suo sguardo libero, curioso e limpido. Spero di realizzare un film che scorra liberamente, un film che ci regali almeno alcune delle emozioni che proviamo leggendo i suoi libri.

(Maybe with Calvino's words. When asked to give three suggestions for the new millennium, he answered: "Do calculations by hand; learn poems by heart; fight abstract language by using precise words; be aware that everything we have can be taken away from us at any moment." When I think of Calvino, the first thing that comes to my mind is his free, curious, and limpid gaze. I hope to make a film that flows freely, a film that would give us at least some of the emotions we experience while reading his books.)

## **The Writer in the Trees**

I followed filmmaker Duccio Chiarini's adventure in making a documentary for the better part of a year. Contrary to what I had imagined, the film project reached the screen before these notes were to be published, prompting me to revisit our conversation in light of what ended up in the

seventy-five-minute cut I saw.<sup>22</sup> I thus had time to consider “the sacrifices, the words that did not become images, what was never shot.”<sup>23</sup> The conversations I had with the director about the film process had activated my own “mental cinema.”<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, not all my expectations were met, yet some were exceeded.

For starters, the title had changed from “Il volo di Italo (Italo’s Flight)” to *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi* (*Italo Calvino: The Writer in the Trees*). The latter immediately evokes *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*), the book that, per Chiarini’s original plan, provides the narrative framework for the film, “containing the story without restricting it,” as he told me. Ultimately, there could be no more fitting title for the portrait of the writer whom Cesare Pavese nicknamed “the squirrel of the pen.”<sup>25</sup>

Chiarini and his collaborators, the writer Sofia Assirelli and the editor Maria Fantastica Valmori, imaginatively employ the method of found footage, mining public and personal archives, juxtaposing real and “fake” documents and excerpts from other films to create an enticing visual score for both Calvino’s life and dramatizations of *Il barone rampante*.<sup>26</sup> In the charming opening sequence, viewers witness protagonist Cosimo di Rondò’s act of rebellion. Overlaid on piano music, mixed with the sound of a projector in the background, grainy images of the sky fill the screen. Scratched old footage, now in black and white, then in warm and muddy colors, show tree branches, a shimmering sea, a family gathering around the table, a boy running barefoot in the woods. The boy, seen from a low angle, waves joyously. A female voiceover (Manuela Mandracchia) reads a memorable passage from the novel:

Fu il 15 di giugno del 1767 che Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, mio fratello, sedette per l’ultima volta in mezzo a noi [...] Tirava vento dal mare, ricordo, e si muovevano le foglie. Cosimo disse: ‘Ho detto che non voglio e non voglio!’ e respinse il piatto di lumache. Mai s’era vista disubbidienza più grave. [...] Di lì a poco lo vedemmo che s’arrampicava su per l’elce. [...] Nostro padre si sporse dal davanzale. “Quando sarai stanco di star lì cambierai idea!” gli gridò. “Non cambierò mai idea,” fece mio fratello, dal ramo. ‘Ti farò vedere io, appena scendi!’ “E io non scenderò più!” E mantenne la parola.<sup>27</sup>

(It was on the fifteenth of June, 1767, that Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, my brother, sat among us for the last time. [...] A breeze was blowing from the sea, I remember, rustling the leaves. Cosimo said: “I told you I don’t want any, and I don’t!” and

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<sup>22</sup> *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*, directed by Duccio Chiarini (Panamafilm, ARTE’ G.E.I.E, Les films d’Ici, Luce Cinecittà), 75 min. The film will circulate in three versions of different length. The seventy-five-minute version was presented at the “Giornate degli autori” at the 80<sup>th</sup> edition of the Venice Film Festival in 2023; a ninety-minute version will be broadcast on Italian Rai Television; and a shortened version of fifty-two minutes will be distributed in France and Germany through the Arte channel. In the latter version segments that were specific to Italian culture were cut.

<sup>23</sup> Tornabuoni, “Il cinema inesistente,” 175. My translation.

<sup>24</sup> Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, 102.

<sup>25</sup> “Lo scoiattolo della penna.” Cesare Pavese, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Milan: Mondadori, 2022), 149. My translation.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Russell calls this process *archiveology*: “the reuse, recycling, appropriation, and borrowing of archival material that filmmakers have been doing for decades” to generate new film narratives. Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*, 0:01:19 to 0:02:15. The text read in voiceover comes from Italo Calvino, *Il barone rampante* in *Romanzi* 1:549, 558–59.

pushed away his plateful of snails. Never had we seen such disobedience [...] In a little while we watched him, from the windows, climbing up the holm oak [...] Our father leaned out the window. “When you’re tired of being up there, you’ll change your mind!” he shouted. “I’ll never change my mind,” exclaimed my brother from the branch. “You’ll see as soon as you come down!” “I’ll never come down again!” And he kept his word).<sup>28</sup>

An aerial view of treetops (a recurrent image in the film) provides the transition to the first appearance of a young Calvino, who, in an interview for French TV, describes how he conjured up the central idea for *Il barone rampante*: “J’ai choisi ces images des arbres dans un pays imaginaire qui... J’étais tout fou d’arbres, parce que ça me permettait d’imaginer cette évasion... que ce n’était pas une évasion... Cette position de solitude que c’est aussi de participation [...] Bien, peut-être je vis là (“I pictured an imaginary country full of trees—I was completely mad for trees, because they allowed me to imagine this escape—well, not an escape, exactly, a position of solitude that also allows for participation [...] maybe I already live there”).<sup>29</sup> While smiling, he looks away shyly, but for an instant his gaze meets the camera, providing viewers with an intimate encounter with the writer.



**Fig. 2.** Screen capture, *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi* directed by Duccio Chiarini, 2023. Courtesy of PanamaFilm.

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<sup>28</sup> Italo Calvino, *The Baron in the Trees*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (New York: HBJ, 1959) 3, 12–13.

<sup>29</sup> *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*, 0:02:41 to 0:02:45. My translation.

This splendid overture is followed by the appearance of numerous authoritative interviews and testimonials: Mario Barenghi (Professor of Italian Literature at University of Milano-Bicocca), Ernesto Ferrero (former director of Einaudi and a writer himself), Walter Barberis (president of Einaudi), scholars like Letizia Modena (Vanderbilt College), Merve Emre (Wesleyan University), French translator Martin Rueff, film director Paolo Virzì, composer Stefano Bollani, and Calvino's daughter, Giovanna Calvino. The film sutures their voices with numerous interviews on Calvino in order to retrace his life: his birth in Santiago De Las Vegas, Cuba to a family of botanists, his childhood in Villa Meridiana in Sanremo, the advent of fascism, Calvino's active participation as a partisan fighter in the antifascist resistance, his travels to New York, and his life in Paris. It explores, too, even if briefly, some of his most famous works, from *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947, *The Path of the Spider Nests*) to *Palomar*.

In contrast to my expectations, but in line perhaps with the canon of documentary filmmaking for television, *Lo scrittore sugli alberi* relies heavily on static talking heads. Such a narrative strategy, although informative, detracts from the imaginative use of archival material shown in the beginning and at various points throughout the film. Moreover, with Barenghi as the leading narrator, there is a prevalence of male voices in the film (at least in the first part). When I asked Chiarini about this choice, he agreed that “I primi quaranta minuti sono per lo più maschili” (“the first 40 minutes of the film are mostly male”). He contended that he had chosen “Barenghi perché è stato il curatore dei saggi di Calvino per i Meridiani, Ferrero e Barberis, che sono gli unici collaboratori rimasti del periodo in cui Calvino lavorava per l'Einaudi, Rueff, il traduttore francese. Ho dato spazio alle voci più forti e convincenti” (“Barenghi because he had been the curator of Calvino's essays for Meridiani; Ferrero, and Barberis, who were the only collaborators left from the time Calvino had worked at Einaudi, and Rueff because he was the French translator. I gave space to the strongest, most convincing, voices”). He added: “Credo che nella seconda parte ci sia una predominanza di voci femminili” (“I believe that female voices dominate in the second part of the film”).<sup>30</sup>

While it is true that the cultural scene in which Calvino lived and worked was predominantly male, it is unfortunate that the film, to a certain extent, perpetuates such a gender imbalance, relying mostly on the voices of influential males to establish the foundations upon which we are asked to understand the author. One might have hoped that including a more diverse group of commentators would have yielded richer results, especially since the cultural milieu in which we are now interpreting Calvino is much broader.

Notwithstanding this imbalance, or the aesthetic limitations imposed on a documentary made for TV, and even despite the time and financial constraints that might have been imposed on the project, *Lo scrittore sugli alberi* represents a precious tribute to Calvino. For Calvino's readers (scholarly or not), watching this film will be like opening a treasure chest. The home movies that were discovered in a closet in the writer's studio in Rome show Calvino as a child with his parents, Eva Mameli and Mario Calvino, and his brother Floriano, walking around Villa Meridiana (today a residential condo surrounded by modern buildings). Those decaying images—now, thanks to this project, preserved in digital format—give us a precious, if brief, glimpse into the enchanting gardens that inspired Calvino's arboreal imagination. Indeed, some of the materials contained in this documentary—previously unseen footage, letters, photos, and drawings—reveal the human being behind the books: the child, the partisan, the editor, the storyteller, the goofy speaker, but also the father and the lover.

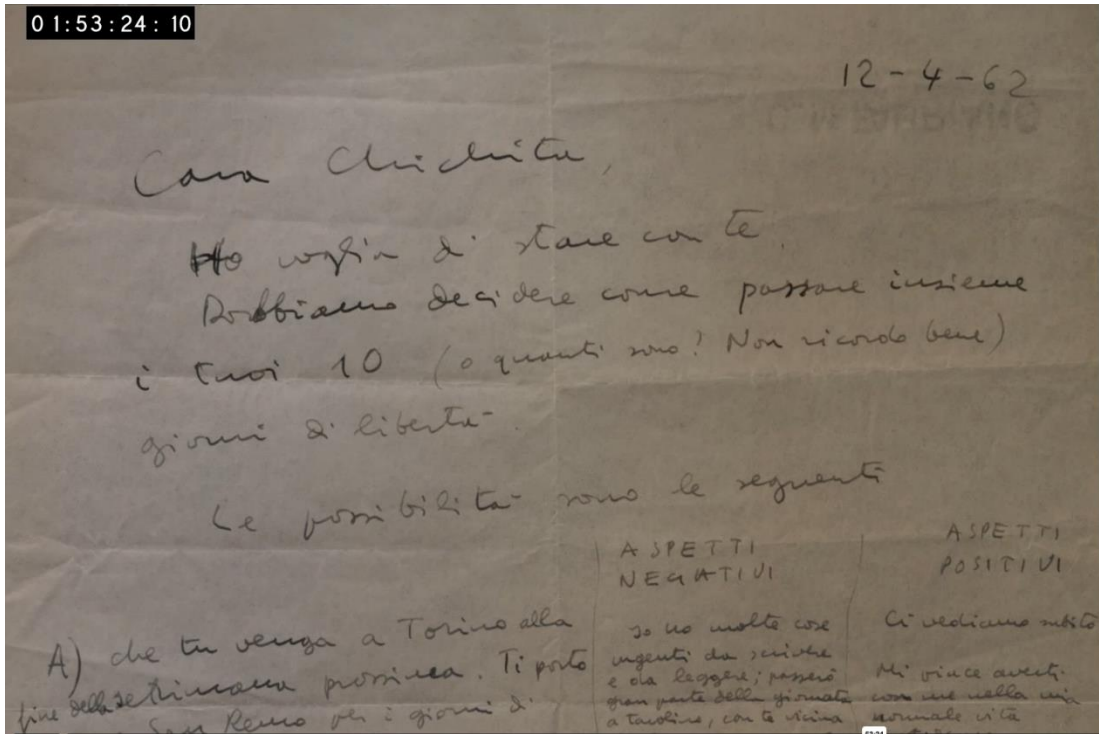
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<sup>30</sup> Duccio Chiarini, interview and translations by Laura Di Bianco, August 27, 2023, via Zoom. All of Chiarini's subsequent quotations derive from this second interview.

Among the many archival gems featured in the film, there is a love letter (provided by Giovanna Calvino) from 1962 to Ester/Chichita, whom Calvino eventually married. In it, he invites her to spend time together and lists the pros and cons of choosing one place rather than another. As Chiarini commented: “Mi ha colpito molto questa lettera per la sua dolcezza e trasparenza. Si trattava di un amore senza sotterfugi, un amore libero di esprimersi, tenerissimo.... Sembrava proprio l’inizio di uno dei suoi racconti...o il finale di *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*. L’ho scelto perché esemplificava la corrispondenza tra l’uomo e lo scrittore” (“I was very struck by this letter because of its sweetness and transparency. It was about a love without subterfuge, a love free to express itself, very tender.... It sounded just like the beginning of one of his stories...or the ending of *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*. I chose it because it exemplified the relationship between the man and the writer”).



**Fig. 3.** Screen capture, *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi* directed by Duccio Chiarini, 2023. Courtesy of PanamaFilm.



**Fig. 4.** From *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi* directed by Duccio Chiarini, 2023. Courtesy of PanamaFilm.

Along the same lines, an anecdote told by Walter Barberis points to the importance of the natural world in Calvino’s work.<sup>31</sup> Barberis recalls witnessing a conversation between Calvino and a child over the course of a walk in the mountains in Val D’Aosta: “Il bambino aveva catturato una rana e la teneva tra le mani quando Calvino, che lo stava osservando, si fermò e gli chiese: lo sai che potrebbe essere tua zia? Nessuno gli aveva mai proposto una tale visione della rana” (“The child had captured a frog and was holding it in his hands, when Calvino, who had been observing him, stopped and asked, ‘Do you know she could be your aunt?’ Nobody had ever proposed to him such a vision of a frog”).<sup>32</sup> This anecdote hints at Calvino’s acute awareness of the kinship between the human and the non-human, while also providing an opening for exploring his passion for folk and fairy tales, a dimension the documentary unfortunately neglects.<sup>33</sup> Brief but significant remarks by Barengi on works like *La nuvola di smog* (1958, *Smog*), *La formica argentina* (1952, *The Argentine Ant*), and *Speculazione edilizia* (1963, *A Plunge into Real Estate*) evoke, even if in passing, Calvino’s growing concern with issues like pollution, deforestation (central in *Il barone*

<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of the role of animals in Calvino’s work, see Serenella Iovino. *Gli animali di Calvino: Storie dall’Antropocene* (Rome: Treccani, 2023), which brings together earlier studies by her on Calvino and the natural world.

<sup>32</sup> *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*, 25:40 to 26:48.

<sup>33</sup> On Calvino and the importance of fairy tales and the fantastic, see Puglia’s article in this issue of *CIS*. On the animal-vegetal-human connection, see Gioia Woods, “Once Upon a Time in Umbria: Italo Calvino and the Fabulist Pastoral,” in *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World*, ed. Patrícia Vieira, Monica Gagliano, and John Ryan (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 165–81, and Woods’ essay in this issue of *CIS*.

*rampante*), and the environmental change that accelerated during the years of Italy's Economic Miracle, reminding us how prophetic his work was, as well as how relevant it continues to be.<sup>34</sup>

As Chiarini had envisioned, this journey ends with Calvino's recommendations for the "new" millennium (which he did not live to see). He recites them solemnly, amid long pauses:

Imparare delle poesie a memoria, molte poesie a memoria, da bambini da giovani anche da vecchi, perché quelle fanno compagnia, uno se le ripete mentalmente...anche fare dei calcoli a mano, delle divisioni, delle estrazioni della radice quadrata, delle cose molto complicate. Combattere l'astrattezza del linguaggio che ci viene imposto ormai con delle cose molto precise, e sapere che tutto quello che abbiamo ci può essere tolto da un momento all'altro... non dico mica di rinunciare a niente... però sapendo che tutto quello che abbiamo può sparire in una nuvola di fumo.

(Learning poems by heart, lots of poems by heart, as a child, as a young person, even as an old person, because those keep one company, one repeats them in the mind....Also doing calculations on paper, divisions, square root extractions, very complicated things. Fighting the abstractness of the language that is imposed on us these days with very precise things, and knowing that everything we have can be taken away from us at any moment... I'm not saying to give up anything... however, knowing that everything we have can disappear in a cloud of smoke.)<sup>35</sup>

And with this void evoked by Calvino's words, we return, once again, to the ending of *Il barone rampante*, the passage about the disappearance of Ombrosa:

Ombrosa non c'è più. Guardando il cielo sgombro, mi domando se davvero è esistita. Quel frastaglio di rami e foglie, biforcazioni, lobi, spiumii, minuto e senza fine, e il cielo solo a sprazzi irregolari e ritagli, forse c'era solo perché ci passasse mio fratello col suo leggero passo di codibugnolo, era un ricamo fatto sul nulla che assomiglia a questo filo d'inchiostro, come l'ho lasciato correre per pagine e pagine, zeppo di cancellature, di rimandi, di sgorbi nervosi, di macchie, di lacune, che a momenti si sgrana in grossi acini chiari, a momenti si infittisce in segni minuscoli come semi puntiformi, ora si ritorce su se stesso, ora si biforca, ora collega grumi di frasi con contorni di foglie o di nuvole, e poi s'intoppa, e poi ripiglia a attorcigliarsi, e corre e corre e si sdipana e avvolge un ultimo grappolo insensato di parole idee sogni ed è finito.

(Ombrosa no longer exists. Looking at the empty sky, I ask myself if it ever did really exist. That mesh of leaves and twigs of fork and froth, minute and endless, with the sky glimpsed only in sudden specks and splinters, perhaps it was only there so that my brother could pass through it with his tomtit's tread, was embroidered on nothing, like this thread of ink which I have let run on for page after page, swarming with cancellations, corrections, doodles, blots and gaps, bursting at times

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<sup>34</sup> On *La nuvola di smog* and *Speculazione edilizia*, see Monica Seger, *Landscape in Between: Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*, 1:10:58 to 1:12:34.

into clear big berries, coagulating at others into piles of tiny starry seeds, then twisting away, forking off, surrounding buds of phrases with frameworks of leaves and clouds, then interweaving again, and so running on and on and on until it splutters and bursts into a last senseless cluster of words, ideas dreams, and so ends.)<sup>36</sup>

Mindful of Calvino's lesson on self-reflexivity, the film retraces its steps, to show us, once again, Calvino as a child in Villa Meridiana, in New York, his hypothetical views from above, in Paris with Chichita, spoon-feeding his daughter Giovanna, or walking on a beach with her in Roccamare. Then, one last image of Calvino, staring straight at the camera: with a pensive look, he meets the viewers' gaze.

Chiarini said to me "Mi domando dove, a ormai cento anni dalla sua nascita, si possa trovare Calvino.... Di sicuro è nelle migliaia di pagine che ha scritto, e negli occhi, nella testa e nel cuore dei suoi lettori" ("I wonder, one hundred years from his birth, where we can find Calvino.... He is certainly in the thousands of pages he wrote, and in the eyes, minds, and hearts of his readers"). *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi* will hopefully inspire us to return to and cherish those pages, which continue to nurture other artistic efforts. Notable recent examples include: *Italo Calvino nelle città (Italo Calvino in the Cities)*, a docufiction directed by Davide Ferrario (co-written with Marco Belpoliti), at the time of this writing in post-production; *Un pomeriggio, Libereso (One Afternoon, Libereso)*, a play inspired by the short story "Un pomeriggio, Adamo" ("Adam, One Afternoon") and directed by Simone Dini Gandini and Roberto Giannarelli, scheduled to be staged at the Teatro Nazionale di Genova in March 2024;<sup>37</sup> finally, a TV miniseries adapted from *Il barone rampante* has been announced by producer Lorenzo Mieli, who secured the rights to the novel (unlike Richard Gere, who unsuccessfully negotiated with Esther Singer for years to do the same).<sup>38</sup> And hopefully, in the next hundred years, in a world progressively affected by climate change, more films will be made with different narrators, human and non-human, more footage will be found, and scholarly efforts will continue to explore Calvino's work and legacy from novel perspectives. Italo's flight continues.

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<sup>36</sup> Calvino, *Il barone rampante*, 776–77; *The Baron in the Trees*, 246. *Italo Calvino, lo scrittore sugli alberi*, 1:12:39 to 1:14:04

<sup>37</sup> Roberto Giannarelli has also directed the documentary film *L'isola di Calvino* (2005, *Calvino's Island*) produced by Fabula Film and Rai 3, which includes interviews with Gore Vidal, Renzo Piano, and Eugenio Scalfari.

<sup>38</sup> In a reading of Ann Goldstein's translation of *Il barone rampante* that took place at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò in October 2017, Richard Gere recounted that Jonathan Cott wrote a script for Luis Malle based on Calvino's novel. However, Esther Singer (Calvino's widow) declined to grant the rights, and the film project was stalled. See Sara Fruner, "Richard Gere Reads Italo Calvino with the 'Baron's Daughter,'" *La voce di New York*, October 27, 2017, <https://lavocedinewyork.com/en/arts/2017/10/27/richard-gere-reads-italo-calvino-with-the-barons-daughter/>.