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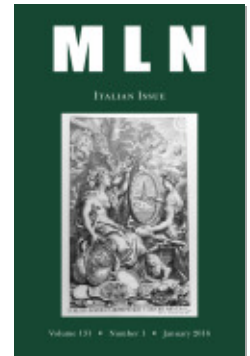
## Matteo Garrone's Reality: The Big Brother Spectacle and Its Rupture

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# Matteo Garrone's *Reality*: The *Big Brother* Spectacle and Its Rupture



Anna Paparcone

In his 1967 seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord wrote: “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation” (thesis 1). The opening of Debord’s book aptly describes what occurs in Matteo Garrone’s 2012 film *Reality* whose protagonist, an exuberant fishmonger by the name of Luciano Ciotola, becomes obsessed with his participation in the reality TV show *Big Brother* to the point that his entire life turns into a spectacle. The spectator witnesses and experiences an overlapping and, ultimately, a (con)fusion between Luciano’s everyday reality and his life as a (potential) member of the reality TV show.

Luciano, who lives with his family in the outskirts of Naples, in “an incredible Neapolitan building, baroque, crumbling and magnificent” (C.G. 57), plods on with their fish shop and the illegal selling of kitchen electrical appliances. At first encouraged by his capricious daughter and lively family,<sup>1</sup> and then by his own wish to change his life and become financially stable, Luciano auditions to be a member of the reality show *Big Brother*. While awaiting a response from the

<sup>1</sup>Garrone significantly states that Luciano is a character that follows the dreams of his family members. Referring to René Girard’s analysis of mimetic desire, Garrone stresses how often one desires something because others desire it, not because he/she really wants it. Luciano’s life is a story of mimetic desire and the story of a society that dreams about escaping from everyday life and following an artificial desire that is often an illusion. Garrone also remarks that this is an aspect of the society in which we live where capitalism is continuously built and reinforces consumption. See Sheila Roberts.

show jury, he becomes increasingly entranced by the glow of television and absorbed by the idea of being secretly watched and evaluated by the show's producers. Consequently, Luciano's usual behavior starts changing, he begins to live as if he were already in the show, losing sight of his family responsibilities and jeopardizing his marriage. The intertwining and confusion between his everyday life and the reality show increase and culminate in Luciano's physical entrance into the *Big Brother* household. Sitting in the courtyard on a white chair spotlighted by a white light, Luciano appears as if he has finally reached his paradise. The film ends with Luciano's uncanny laughter. Such a finale leaves the spectator perplexed about Luciano's experience in the *Big Brother* house. Does Luciano laugh because he is happy to have fulfilled his dream? Or, maybe, because, after all the difficulties, he is finally free to be fully himself? Or does he laugh because he has realized how foolish he has been? His laughter may well be echoing the words of Wanda, one of the main characters in Fellini's *Lo sceicco bianco* (*The White Sheik*), who, near the end of the picture, says, "Our real life is in our dreams, but sometimes dreams are a fatal abyss." There may also be legitimate doubts that Luciano has indeed entered the house. Perhaps he is just dreaming of doing it.

The impossibility of making sense of Luciano's uncanny laughter suggests, I argue, the potential for experiencing, here and elsewhere in the film, the rupture of the spectacle, a breach in the indistinguishable sameness between reality and fiction. In the first section of this study ("The Diegesis: Luciano's Reality vis-à-vis the Construction and Persistence of the Spectacle"), I will show how the film offers a painstaking representation of the pervasiveness and alluring quality of the spectacle that takes over Luciano's life and identity. Such an identity is strictly connected to his family bonds, his work and, overall, to Neapolitan cultural traditions. However, in the second section of this essay ("Formal Choices: the Rupture of the Spectacle"), starting from Luciano's final uncanny laughter, I will pinpoint crucial moments in which the film deploys specific estranging techniques (camera movements, crane shots, and music score) that breach the apparently seamless spectacle and reveal the possibility of distinguishing the spectacle from reality. On the one hand, as we identify with Luciano's story, the spectacle pervades every moment of his (and our) life, and reality and fiction overlap becoming hardly distinguishable; on the other hand, however, the rupture of the spectacle occurs partially within the film's diegesis (through the presence of Luciano's family members) and is brought to full completion by resorting to the aforementioned formal

techniques. In other words, the film conveys the idea that, although subtle and often imperceptible, a line between reality and fiction nonetheless exists, and that it is possible to discern between Luciano's everyday life (marked overall as natural and positive) and fiction (the reality-show characterized as constructed and somewhat negative).<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, even if the film is constructed as a (dark) fairytale (see Miller), it seems to suggest that Reality (as in the title) may indeed include dreams and fantasies, but it primarily reaffirms family bonds and local cultural traditions.<sup>3</sup>

My theoretical point of reference will be Guy Debord's aforementioned text. Though written in 1967, it offers a conceptualization of the spectacle that is still relevant today for a critique of late capitalism whose effects of alienation and commodification emerge clearly in Luciano's story. Not only does Luciano seem to slowly transform himself into a marketing commodity, but most significantly his adventure begins at the mall, the world of globalized market and mass consumption par excellence.<sup>4</sup> Here Luciano auditions for the first time, that is to say, he "labels" himself as a quasi-anonymous product and "sells" his persona to the *Big Brother* producers. While Debord asserts that the whole life has become a spectacle, he also believes in a moment of *détournement*, the chance for a revolutionary understanding of the existence of the spectacle, and of its rupture. In my view, Garrone's estranging techniques function as moments of *détournement*, in which the spectator questions the spectacle and reaffirms his own agency.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Such a distinction and evaluation of the difference between reality and fiction are emphasized also in the movie's trailer (see "Reality, quando uno show televisivo si distacca dalla realtà").

<sup>3</sup>To further explore the concept of "reality" in Garrone's film, see Marineo 4–7.

<sup>4</sup>Speaking about various spaces in the film (particularly Luciano's family house), Lorenzo Rossi observes that "gli spazi esterni (o pubblici) come la villa, il ristorante che si vedono nell' apertura, la discoteca, l'acquapark o la stessa piazzetta del quartiere napoletano in cui il film si svolge, rimangono posti nei quali emerge la concezione di spazio comune come luogo della serialità, della standardizzazione delle abitudini e della reificazione tra spazio e individuo" (20).

<sup>5</sup>Debord's ideas are pertinent also if we consider the current Italian film industry that, although aiming at being part of a global market, is still dramatically tied to a late capitalist economy. Production and distribution undergo state financial support, and Italian films are hardly distributed on a global market. See Ardizzoli and Ferrari.

### The Diegesis: Luciano's Reality vis-à-vis the Construction and Persistence of the Spectacle

The life of Luciano, a Pinocchio of the modern era,<sup>6</sup> as well as the existence of his family, often appear as a grand spectacle. This is confirmed by the scene of the family wedding, in which the spectator is immersed at the beginning of the film, and by the scene where Luciano works at his fish stand.

At the family wedding, Luciano dresses up as a drag queen<sup>7</sup> who is particularly fond of the special wedding guest, Enzo, the winner of the latest season of *Big Brother* and a sort of "heavenly angel" (Cortellessa). As Richard Kaplan clarifies commenting on Debord's thought, "in the absolutely alienated world of the spectacle . . . the populace finds connection, community and purpose only through the intermediation of corporate-contrived, government-manufactured and media-supplied narratives of stars, celebrities and leaders" (462).<sup>8</sup> In terms of fame and wealth, Enzo represents the fulfillment of Luciano's dreams. The choice of the two characters' names is significantly tied to their role in the film: Enzo, a diminutive of *Vincenzo*, which is etymologically connected with the word *vincente* ('winner'), recalls within the Christian iconography the one who wins over evil, and, therefore, this character could indeed represent more generally God on earth. This is confirmed in two scenes in which Enzo is physically elevated compared to the

<sup>6</sup>See Finos. Later in the film, the spectator sees Luciano looking at a cricket in his room, a scene that again reminds of Pinocchio's fairytale, particularly of Gemini cricket and his role. In the film, Luciano believes that the little insect is observing and judging him to report his behavior to the *Big Brother* producers.

<sup>7</sup>In this scene, the filmmaker reports, in a sort of documentary style, a common practice among people at least in the Southern Italy, especially during the festivities of Carnival. Luciano's costume is, in fact, a sort of carnivalesque rupture of the established and normalized social order. My direct experience with similar parties and weddings allows me to add that this costume is often chosen because is easy to make, cheap, but also because it gives young men the opportunity to say and do things that normally males would not say or do. It is definitively a performance, a spectacle that is accepted as nothing more than entertainment.

<sup>8</sup>In his article, Kaplan explicates and assesses Debord's theory, highlighting its most serious defect, that is "Debord's rejection of the necessary intermediation of social life by culture and communication" (457). In other words, Debord's "model of liberal individual ignores the ways in which the individual's thinking and cultural plans are given by the surrounding social-cultural order, and how action is implicitly structured by the sets of social relations in which we are embedded . . . This model of individual action evidently neglects the process-oriented, pragmatic, context-dependent but active dimension of the individual decisions" (467). Though very acute, Kaplan's critique of Debord's theory does not find its confirmation in Garrone's film, where in fact Luciano's involvement with the *Big Brother* TV show is a result of his social relations (his family's influence) and cultural influence (most of the people around him are enchanted by the reality show).

rest of the characters: in fact, after the family wedding, Luciano sees Enzo leaving in a helicopter to go back to *his house*, while, in a later scene, Enzo appears as the guest of honor in a disco by literally flying in front of Luciano, who looks at him in a sort of ecstasy. Both scenes find their meaningful reference and synthesis in Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) first sequence, in which a helicopter flies over the outskirts of Rome transporting a statue of Christ to the Vatican. Enzo turns into a Christological figure whose power over common people lays in his media success and fame. Interestingly, in *La dolce vita* Fellini takes an early look at the emptiness of celebrity as much as Garrone does in *Reality*. The name of *Luciano* too elucidates the character's role. Derived from the word *luce* (light), it would indicate an enlightened human being; yet, in this case, the light that the TV spectacle shines on Luciano also blinds him, causing him to lose sight of the reality.

Like Luciano, his family too contributes to animate the spectacle at the wedding, and is scrutinized from above, as suggested by the establishing shot at the beginning of the movie which is clearly from a helicopter and signifies the presence of an outside and superior "eye" that looks over the events. Luciano's family is a group of loud and lively human beings, and reminds the spectator of Fellini's clown-like characters in *8½* (1963); they are bulky, heavily dressed, and with excessive make up.<sup>9</sup> The photography shows a wide range of bright and vivid colors, and the setting is itself majestic and baroque.<sup>10</sup> The people and setting seem to be constructed as part of a grand spectacle that is not, to refer back to Debord, "a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (thesis 4).

At the end of the wedding, the whole family returns home and slowly undress in the privacy of their quiet rooms where they also "take off their masks" (particularly in the case of Luciano). Sociologist Erving Goffman maintained that in a social interaction, as in a theatrical performance, there is an onstage area where actors (individuals) appear before the audience; this is where positive self-concepts and desired impressions are offered. But there is, as well, a backstage—a hidden, private area where it is more likely that individuals are authentically themselves and drop their societal roles and identities.<sup>11</sup> Garrone offers a powerful contrast between the spectacle at the wedding party

<sup>9</sup>In the interview with Sheila Roberts, Garrone remarks: "It was like a Pixar movie for me, like a cartoon, an animated film. I wanted to have actors with very strong and expressive faces. Also, the colors in the film have to be very bright and powerful."

<sup>10</sup>The choice of such photography and the peculiar use of colors and composition mirror the filmmaker's early education in painting. See Rossi 82–83.

<sup>11</sup>See Gary Fine and Philip Manning 45–46. And George Ritzer 372.

and the reality of these individuals who return to be themselves, thus cuing the spectator for other estranging moments of the film in which the possibility of distinguishing between spectacle-fiction and reality emerges more strongly.

It is worth noticing here that the spectacle that is produced within family relations and/or Neapolitan cultural traditions is implicitly compared and contrasted with the highly artificial and constructed spectacle that is proposed by the *Big Brother* reality show, and ultimately stands as being closer to the characters' everyday life and authentic reality. In fact, both Luciano's disguise at the wedding and his family's festive presence may not unanimously and necessarily be perceived as strong performative actions, because the preparatory rituals of the wedding are tacitly carried out according to a long-standing Neapolitan (or Southern Italian) tradition and have become so habitual and mechanical to lose their conscious artificial, fabricated quality. In other words, though performative, they may be well considered or perceived as an intrinsic and authentic part of the reality of at least a certain social stratum of Neapolitan society. The perception of an authentic reality within the spectacle is reinforced by the fact that the villa where the wedding celebration occurs is not an imaginary place, but a real five-star restaurant and hotel, La Sonrisa, located in Sant'Antonio Abate (in the Neapolitan *periferia*), which boasts luxurious rooms, a spacious park and waterfalls, none of which has been altered in the film.

Following Luciano's everyday activities, the spectator sees him selling fish from his seafood stand, a sort of theatre stage, where he calls his clients, sings, dances, speaks, and thanks people. As a fishmonger Luciano reminds us of "o' pazzariell" (a colorful version of a town crier) in Vittorio De Sica's *L'Oro di Napoli* (*The Gold of Naples*, 1954), a familiar figure of Neapolitan tradition. Such a character was a street artist of poor means, who was active between the eighteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, and made money by advertising new shop opening while wearing a Bourbon uniform, marching, dancing and reciting or singing rhymes. Although at his workplace Luciano performs as a fishmonger, very much like "o' pazzariell" did on the streets, once again we witness a performance that is qualitatively different from the one we see as Luciano begins to consciously transform himself into the reality show member. The roles of fishmonger and "pazzariell," though performative, are not necessarily perceived as constructed, because they are products of centuries of cultural practices and exchanges. These roles still belong to the traditional



Neapolitan shared identity that is not as artificially fabricated as the one required or proposed by the reality TV show spectacle. Furthermore, the authenticity of Luciano's actions is reinforced by the fact that they are not presented as self-conscious decisions. The lack of the protagonist's self-reflection, especially if compared to another scene where Luciano is getting ready for his first audition,<sup>12</sup> weakens his every day "performance" and makes it seem more as an intrinsic part of Luciano's "true" spontaneous self. As a result, the spectator might perceive the protagonist's life at work as authentic and real. Luciano could be seen as a loud, warm, animated, and gesticulating Neapolitan worker who deals with his own clients, not necessarily as a performer. Traits of Luciano's essential characteristics that seem to form a certain Neapolitan identity can be found also in the very beginning of De Sica's *L'Oro di Napoli*, which opens with these captions:

Voi vedrete in questo film, luoghi e gente di Napoli. Infiniti sono gli aspetti splendidi ed umili, tristi e gioiosi dei vicoli partenopei. Noi ne mostriamo soltanto una piccola parte, ma troverete ugualmente tracce di quell'amore di vita, di quella pazienza e di quella continua speranza che sono L'Oro di Napoli."<sup>13</sup>

Despite the persistence of the everyday spectacle, once again the protagonist's life and identity are hardly represented as artificial thus far. As we will see, it is this very image of the real Luciano that Garrone will contrast with the fabricated Luciano as he starts living the life of the reality show.

In fact, it is only when Luciano participates in his first tryout for *Big Brother* and is chosen for the following auditions at Cinecittà that he begins concentrating and reflecting consciously on himself, on his appearance, on what he says and does, and on how he behaves. In doing so, he seems to lose his spontaneity and to begin constructing his own image. A precise scene marks such a moment. Before going to Rome, Luciano is again in front of a mirror in his bedroom. The

<sup>12</sup>In this scene Luciano, in front of a mirror, begins to wonder what to wear to be able to impress the show producer. By questioning his clothing, he starts questioning his own identity.

<sup>13</sup>Garrone seems to be inspired particularly by the first and fourth episodes. In the first episode, the spectator gets acquainted with certain traditional aspects of Neapolitan life in the streets (the poverty, the chaos, the Christmas vendors), as well as with the people's proverbial vitality, hopes and patience. Specifically, the scene in which Saverio dances on the balcony and then goes back to his living room, may have inspired Garrone for the character's capacity of combining tragedy and comedy. The fourth episode, instead, presents a bankrupt count, Prospero, who firmly believes to be a great card player, as much as Luciano believes to be a perfect member of the *Big Brother* house. An acute sense of illusion pervades both characters (Prospero and Luciano).

first time the spectator saw the protagonist reflected in a mirror was when, at the wedding celebration, he was disguised initially as an old lady and then as a drag queen, and was not particularly concerned about his appearance. This time, instead, he is at home, he does not wear a mask or a costume. Paradoxically, it is in the familiar space of his house that Garrone shows Luciano's beginning transformation, thus juxtaposing the construction of his artificial identity to a space that represents reality and authenticity. The camera lingers on Luciano who is worried about appearing (how he looks, what to wear) rather than being (that is, behaving as he has always done). Mindful of Debord, we notice the domination of the economy over social life, which first causes an "obvious degradation of *being* into *having*" and, subsequently, "a generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*" (thesis 17).<sup>14</sup> But let us follow Luciano's trajectory from his everyday life into the reality show.

When Luciano auditions for the second time at Cinecittà, he is absolutely certain that he made an impression on the show's producers thanks to his personality and behavior ("l'aggie scioccat... che l'aggie cumbinat", that is "I shocked them... I blew them away," he continues to repeat in Neapolitan dialect to his family after the audition). From that moment on, he starts waiting for the *Big Brother's* call that would confirm his participation in the reality show. Back home, he bows in front of friends and neighbors, his "audience," in a sort of open space or symbolic theatre surrounded by viewers as if he had just ended a performance.<sup>15</sup> And, this time, he has indeed performed to become a member of the *Big Brother* house. His passage from a fishmonger to a showbiz man is now definitive. The next day, all his acquaintances and friends compliment him on his achievement, increasing his excitement and helping him to "enter his role" (as a member of *Big Brother*). The bartender reminds him that he is "a character" ("un personaggio") and asks him if he has been officially admitted into the *Big Brother* house ("allora, stiamo già là?" Luciano nods answering that "mentally" he is already there ("con la testa sì"), which confirms that, rather than living actively in his own reality, he is now living in and for the show he watches daily on TV. Following Debord, we may argue that Luciano has surrendered his agency by deciding to *live* as if he were already a member of the reality show:

<sup>14</sup>On the same subject, see also thesis 10.

<sup>15</sup>This scene, as well as the setting (particularly Luciano's home), some characters (his family members and the people on the street) and the general atmosphere in the film, remind one of Edoardo De Filippo's work, particularly *Natale in casa Cupiello* and *Filumena Marturano* (later adapted by Tonino Guerra for Vittorio De Sica's film *Matrimonio all'italiana*). Garrone has admitted in several interviews that De Filippo's plays greatly influenced *Reality*. See Roberts.

The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere. (Debord, thesis 30)

In compliance with Debord's observations, Luciano's immersion into the *Big Brother* TV show becomes gradually contemplative and passive, since the protagonist gives up his job and spends most of his day closed in his room while watching the reality show.<sup>16</sup> The active agency that should come with Luciano's new role as a member of the reality-show is replaced by his incapacity to take action. Even when he is finally in the house, he keeps watching the other *Big Brother* participants rather than engaging in their activities.

Luciano follows a trajectory that is opposite to that of the famous Rupert Pumkin in Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* (1983) and to that of Truman Burbank in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). In fact, even if Rupert Pumkin keeps fantasizing about his career as a comedian, the words he tells after been arrested for kidnapping his TV idol—"Tomorrow you'll know I wasn't kidding and you'll all think I'm crazy. But I figure it this way: better to be king for a night, than schmuck for a lifetime"—show that he is somewhat aware of his own choices and of the distinctions between reality and fantasy. Truman, in Weir's film, breaks up with the TV show based on his life, runs away and completely frees himself by slowly becoming aware of the difference between the reality-show (denoted as a false reality) and a non-constructed reality (his life without the camera's supervision). The fact that Luciano seems increasingly unaware of such distinction depletes his agency and authenticity, as well as his critical capacities and his quality of life.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately the film endorses the idea that in his

<sup>16</sup>Debord states: "Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness" (thesis 8). We will see that even when Luciano is finally in the *Big Brother* house, he does nothing but watching the other members of the show.

<sup>17</sup>In an interview with journalist and film critic Bor Beekman, Garrone remarks that the film is a modern fairytale (a comedy that slowly becomes very dramatic), that the story focuses primarily on the protagonist's psychological journey, on his human conflict, and on his dreams, and finally that Luciano *loses* his identity while he is creating his artificial paradise and is trying to fulfill his dreams. In other words, Luciano's dreams become a nightmare. Garrone also admits that he was inspired by Fellini's *Lo sciacco bianco*, as in this story the protagonist's dream becomes a nightmare as well. With regard to Luciano's loss of identity, see also Sammarco 22–25.

everyday life (his reality) the protagonist is authentically himself and preserves his identity, while the reality show (the fiction) represents a scripted and distorted reality that leads him to the loss of authenticity.

Gradually Luciano starts believing that while he is carrying on his daily activities, he is continuously and obsessively observed by the eye of the *Big Brother* camera, which is considering whether to admit him to the show or not. Very much like Maddalena, the protagonist of Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1952), Luciano's desire to be part of the show business grows increasingly frenzied. At this point, Luciano's confusion between reality and fiction is complete: his life becomes a performance, he is (or pretends to be) nicer than he was earlier and, in order to impress the *Big Brother* producers, he starts giving his belongings to poor people (when before he had shooed a beggar away), quits his daily swindles, and, finally, closes his fish shop, which ultimately worsens his family's economic situation and jeopardizes his marriage. To appear as the right person for the show becomes Luciano's main goal.<sup>18</sup> He spends more and more time enclosed in his house constantly watching the everyday life of the *Big Brother* members on TV, so much so that, in Debordian terms, Luciano becomes a spectator whose consciousness, "imprisoned in a flat universe, bound by the screen of the spectacle behind which his life has been deported, knows only the fictional speakers who unilaterally surround him with their commodities" (Debord, thesis 218).

When the confusion between Luciano's supposed authentic reality and the fictional reality show is at its peak, two women, Luciano's wife, Maria, and his aunt Nunzia, openly state that Luciano is just living a fantasy, and that he has lost sight of reality. It is crucial to notice here

<sup>18</sup>Luciano believes that being nice and good hearted is what will assure him a place in the Big Brother house, a view that refers to the Catholic tradition values and that may not be accurate in relation to the criteria of selection for the *Big Brother* show. This scene allows the spectator to connect with many other scenes in the film where religion becomes pivotal (for instance, when Luciano is in the church, or at the Good Friday procession, or at the cemetery). Most of the times Luciano looks up, he either contemplates God and pray (in the church or at the Good Friday procession), or stares at the TV screen, at the cricket, which represents the Big Brother camera, or at Enzo. The equation between God and the reality-show is reinforced throughout the film. For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the film and the Christian Catholic tradition, see Alfieri. See also Kohler. In regard to the association between spectacle and religion, see Debord (theses 20, 25, 50). Furthermore, in the first chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* ("Separation perfected"), before starting to explain his first thesis, Debord cites Feuerbach's preface to the second edition of his work *The essence of Christianity*: "But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence . . . *illusion* only is *sacred*, *truth profane*. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness."

that once again it is within the protagonist's family relations that the existence of a reality is confirmed. Since the beginning of Luciano's involvement with the reality show, aunt Nunzia expresses her concerns about her nephew's participation. In fact, she encourages Luciano's family not to press him to do the first audition at the mall. Later, when Luciano is becoming obsessed with the *Big Brother's* cameras observing him, aunt Nunzia clearly states that it is better for him to quit thinking about the show. She likes watching it, but she would not welcome her nephew becoming a *Big Brother* house member, that is to say, the fictitious spectacle must not take over their everyday reality.

Maria expresses the same idea as aunt Nunzia, but without positive results. She breaks up with Luciano and asks his best friend Michele for help, but every attempt fails. Maria's desperation is emphasized in a long sequence in which the woman cries in the arms of Michele, restating that her husband is out of his mind ("ha pers a cap," "he has gone crazy"). Maria manages to have Luciano participate in a religious ceremony and later in the procession for the passion of Christ, hoping that a divine intervention will help Luciano return to his authentic self. However, Luciano's divinity is not Jesus.<sup>19</sup> His God and his heavenly state are elsewhere. He sneaks away and goes straight to the *Big Brother* house, which he enters without permission by climbing over the gate and passing through the bushes.

In the house, Luciano first looks at other participants in the reality show from behind the glass walls and the cameras, then he smiles and shows to be happy. Literary critic Andrea Cortellessa remarks that "Luciano finalmente è uscito dalla sua vita 'recitata' fuori: ed è entrato nella 'vita reale,' quella in cui il suo modello di esistenza, e l'esistenza che davvero conduce, combaciano a perfezione. In Paradiso, cioè." Federico Gironi further notes that "Matteo Garrone non vede e non propone il distacco registico o dello spettatore: al contrario ribadisce con amarezza e sarcasmo come tutto il mondo sia oramai (o forse è sempre stato) uno smisurato set all'interno del quale va in scena la commedia della vita" (50).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>At the procession, Luciano, in imitation of Christ, is preparing himself to his passage to a better life. Luciano looks up in contemplation, like he does when he is in a religious space (the church or the procession) or when he watches the TV show. Such alignment suggests that Luciano's God is indeed the *Big Brother*. Luciano's passage to a better life is foreseen in the ironic scene in which the protagonist is at the cemetery and meets two old women whom he mistakes for two emissaries of the show production. The ladies talk about his entrance in the "house" (of God) but Luciano thinks they are referring to the "house" of the *Big Brother*. Such scene reinforces the spectator's belief that Luciano's God is indeed within the walls of the TV show.

<sup>20</sup>About the final scene, Garrone states that Luciano arrives in this artificial paradise, and that he prefers such an open finale so that everyone can give his/her own

Despite his family attempts to bring Luciano (and the spectator) back to his everyday reality, Luciano's trajectory, from the beginning to the end, keeps in play the confusion between reality and fiction, endorsing the idea that a full recognition of the differences between them is impossible. In such a way, the story seems to align with the general trend of some films that premiered recently (for instance, Robert Greene's documentary *Actress*, 2014, or Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman*, 2014) in which the line between fiction and reality is completely blurred. In other words, if one considers only Luciano's story (the diegesis), Debord's *détournement*, that is, the diversion from, the rupture of the spectacle's dominion,<sup>21</sup> does not occur. One could then accept Cortellessa's view and agree that the reality show (the model of existence) and "real" life (existence itself) are perfectly the same.

### Formal Choices: the Rupture of the Spectacle

Despite the general confusion between reality and fiction generated in the narrative by Luciano's fantasies, I argue that it is precisely when the protagonist makes his much coveted dream come true (being in the house) and when the model of his existence and his life perfectly overlap that an uncanny feeling or awareness is generated, as signaled by his laughter. I believe that in this instance as well as in other scenes, the film, by deploying certain formal techniques, subtly conveys the idea that it is still possible to detect the line that divides reality from fiction.

As we have seen, the first part of the film establishes a contrast between Luciano's life before he starts his auditions—which is overall marked as his authentic reality—and his life after the first audition, which is instead presented as more consciously constructed and artifi-

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interpretation. It reminds Garrone of the ending of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* where De Niro is laughing. At the end, De Niro, the main character, starts to laugh and laugh. See Roberts. In another interview, the director remarks: "Per evitare il messaggio troppo retorico della 'televisione che uccide' abbiamo scartato la prima sceneggiatura, nella quale era presente uno scontro fra il protagonista e la polizia, coi relativi risvolti tragici. Così la scelta è ricaduta sulla risata folle" (Damiola 91).

<sup>21</sup>In his thesis 206, Debord states: "this theoretical consciousness of movement, in which the movement's very trace must be evident, manifests itself by the *inversion* of the established relations between concepts and by the *diversion* of all the acquisitions of previous critique . . . . Diversion leads to the subversion of past critical conclusions which were frozen into respectable truths, namely, transformed into lies." In his 208 thesis he concludes: "diversion is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It appears in communication, which knows it cannot pretend to guarantee anything definitively and in itself. At its peak, it is language which cannot be confirmed by any former or supra-critical reference."

cial. Garrone employs characters like Luciano's wife, aunt, and friends as reminders of what is commonly perceived as reality (family bonds, job, shared traditions). However, it is Luciano's final laughter (which disorients the spectators and leads them to wonder what lays beyond that behavior) as well as the filmmaker's choice of beginning and ending the film with a helicopter/crane camera shot that truly breach the apparently seamless spectacle and convey the filmmaker's belief in the possibility of distinguishing reality from a "constructed" fiction or spectacle.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the filmmaker employs specific musical themes that, though characterized by a certain fairytale quality, also denote and distinguish moments when Luciano is immersed in his everyday reality and moments when, instead, he is living the reality show constructed life. Let us analyze these distancing techniques in detail.

As mentioned earlier, the film begins with a panoramic shot of the gulf of Naples from a helicopter. The camera pans through the Neapolitan suburban area, first following from afar and then zooming on a gilded horse-drawn carriage that takes the newlyweds to the restaurant where Luciano's family's wedding reception and Enzo's performance take place. The long shot gives the impression that the microcosm of Luciano's family is observed and supervised from above by an inquisitive eye and creates a distance between the spectator and Luciano's point of view, thus opening the possibility of going beyond Luciano's experience and confusion. Such an establishing overhead shot immediately catches one's attention as being particularly "real" as it flies the spectator through the Neapolitan gulf to the suburban wasteland that those of us who were born and raised in the Neapolitan area easily recognize. We do not see the picturesque historic center of Naples, but the nondescript outskirts, or *periferia*, where people struggle to make their dreams come true. While it is not true that, within the diegesis, the *Big Brother* cameras follow Luciano, it is certain that an extra-diegetic eye (the filmmaker's and the spectator's) is continuously observing him.

The filmmaker maintains the distinction between reality and spectacle also by choosing to follow Luciano with a hand-held camera, which increases the effect of spontaneity and immediacy, and by offering the spectators numerous long tracking shots, pans, and close-ups of the characters. As Gabriele Niola remarks, Garrone is the operator of his own films and, at each shot, he asks the actors not to repeat the

<sup>22</sup>Garrone uses crane shots also throughout the film, especially when he is looking over the "piazza" where Luciano's fish shop is located, and at Cinecittà, when Luciano auditions for the second time.

same line in the same way, but to vary on the basis of the concepts the actors need to express. This formal choice allows the filmmaker to “lasciarsi distrarre da quel che accade a margine della scena, andandosi a soffermare su un dettaglio improvviso che cattura la sua attenzione (la bambina che gioca col bottone) o improvvisamente negando i controcampi di un dialogo perché affascinato da un’espressione, un taglio di luce o una composizione particolare” (Niola).<sup>23</sup> As a result, on the one hand spectators may immerse themselves into Luciano’s everyday life and feelings, may identify with the protagonist and, finally, lose sight of the subtle line that separates his everyday life from the reality show. On the other hand, however, the same technique allows the spectators to obtain an almost tangible view of the reality by getting close not only to Luciano, but also to the people surrounding him—particularly his wife, his aunt, and his friend Michele—and the places he inhabits—particularly the narrow streets, the neighborhood, the bar, and the local *piazza* where the fish stand is located. In other words, such formal device makes the filmmaker and the spectator closer to what Garrone establishes as Luciano’s reality.

Garrone’s film certainly has much in common with Neorealist films<sup>24</sup> as it employs some of the features that Georges Sadoul identifies as governing neorealist practice, including “location shooting, long takes, unobtrusive editing, natural lighting, a predominance of medium and long shots, respect for the continuity of time and space, use of contemporary, true-to-life subjects, an uncontrived, open-ended plot, working class protagonists, a non-professional cast, dialogue in the vernacular.”<sup>25</sup> Garrone’s realist approach is emphasized not only by the frequency of long shots, the preference for location shooting, or the closeness to lower classes, but also by the use of Neapolitan dialect that allows one to scrutinize closely the Neapolitan psychological and cultural reality, and to better portray the nuances of Luciano’s feelings.<sup>26</sup>

By the same token, it is significant that the camera does not get close to the members of the *Big Brother* house when Luciano is finally there. The young men and women in the house are often shot from afar and, most of the times, out of focus; there are few medium shots

<sup>23</sup>See also Dallas and Roberts.

<sup>24</sup>Garrone is particularly indebted to De Sica’s *L’Oro di Napoli*, Visconti’s *Bellissima* and Fellini’s *Lo sceicco bianco*. In this last movie, the protagonist’s dream becomes a nightmare as it happens to Luciano. Though not strictly Neorealist, these films share various features of the Neorealist practice.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* 22.

<sup>26</sup>The filmmaker’s realist approach to the story may be also related to the fact that Luciano’s adventure is based on a true story, that of Garrone’s brother-in-law. See Beckman and Roberts.



(with a glass wall between Luciano and the house members) and no close-ups, which seems to confirm the filmmaker's will to diminish the value of the reality show when compared to reality, and to keep himself and the spectator at a distance from an alienated world that hardly makes sense. The *Big Brother* house looks like a surreal world where everything and everyone is perfect. Umberto Eco would say that the reality is not simply reproduced, but even improved in order to sell something, for purely commercial goals.<sup>27</sup> The distance between the spectator and the reality-show is further emphasized by the fact that the members of the house hardly speak. The spectator can only hear some noise, sounds, mumbled words, as if those people were aliens unable to communicate. And maybe Luciano, who does not say a word either, is slowly and happily integrating into that world.

When Luciano finally sits outside and starts laughing in an even more surreal white space—which may suggest his “catharsis,” death and subsequent arrival in Paradise—Garrone ends the film with another long crane shot. With such a formal choice, the filmmaker, the true God-like figure or a sort of semi-divine demiurge, seems to suggest that one needs and can keep a certain distance from the reality TV show's alluring call, in order to avoid falling prey, like Luciano, of a virtual, fictional world that ultimately may not grant happiness.

Another of the film's formal aspects that may lead the spectator to identify Luciano's everyday life with reality, and to consider Luciano's “reality-show” as a fictionalized and “dangerous” version of this reality, is the film score by famous composer Alexandre Desplat. In an interview with Lanie Goodman, in which the musician describes his creative process, he underlines that for most of his works he starts from the moving image:

Of course I read the screenplay for a film, but it's only words and paper. What really turns me on is the visual perception—I compose when I see a picture . . . . As far as the vocabulary, I don't talk much about it. I try to follow the energy that the music is taking and make something appear that the director hasn't yet made appear—something invisible.

In the case of *Reality*, the music definitively complies with the film's images and with the characters' feelings, but more than surprising the director with something he has not yet generated, it expresses the filmmaker's intention to present the film as a fairytale. In fact, the music contributes to creating a surreal atmosphere, and as the rhythm becomes more and more hectic, chromatic elements (a tribute to Nino

<sup>27</sup>Umberto Eco. “Nel cuore dell'impero. Viaggio nell'iperrealtà.”

Rota, it seems) come into play. The fairy-tale atmosphere is stressed by the use of strings, celesta and harp, which often serve to connect various scenes of the film.<sup>28</sup> As the score perfectly captures a sense of “enchantment and wonder” (Iannone), it also remarkably emphasizes the protagonist’s naïf, genuine personality and deeper feelings.

To be more specific, it is possible to identify two main leitmotifs—or, better, as composer Jackson Hill observed, “two stylistic thematic types”<sup>29</sup>—that often overlap. The first theme, more hectic and fragmented, at times fast (as in the first scene where the carriage goes to the restaurant) and, other times, slower (as in the scene of Luciano’s family at home after the wedding), may create both a fairytale, dream-like atmosphere and, with its circular movement, a sense of constriction and auto-referentiality related to everyday anxieties and problems. The viewer may be inclined to associate this theme with Luciano’s familiar and ordinary reality. The second theme, which appears roughly forty five seconds into the scene of the family at home after the wedding, is more lyrical, sometimes obsessive, and it is played with a bassoon, wind instruments and strings. This theme “contributes to create a quiet and suspended atmosphere, although obsessiveness lies in melodic and rhythmical elements, always circular and closed in themselves” (Neonato), and often conveys a sense of fantasy, illusion, and a sort of dream-like status.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned above, these themes constitute thin threads that run throughout the film and that, sometimes, overlap (as in the scene at home after the wedding or the scene at Cinecittà), thus unifying the various moments of Luciano’s adventure, and showing that it is indeed difficult to separate reality from fiction.

However, it is crucial to notice that Desplat also establishes a more subtle distinction between dream-like reality (fiction) and reality (Luciano’s everyday life) by using the exact same theme in scenes where fantasy is predominant. For instance, the scene when Luciano goes back home after his audition at Cinecittà and his family and

<sup>28</sup>I am very grateful to musicologist and pianist Stefania Neonato for exchanging her views on the film music score, which confirmed my reading.

<sup>29</sup>Hill specifies that he does not see leitmotifs in the Wagnerian sense at work in the film. The elements do not seem to be literal enough to say that they are true leitmotifs. There are certainly two “contrasting stylistic thematic types.” One is clearly the texture with strings and celesta-piano in triads in eighth-note rhythms, as heard in the opening scene. The other one is a more lyrical theme characterized by the high bassoon, whose statements are similar to the other bassoon statements in *Senza trucco* and *L'illusione*. It is interesting to see these disparate elements at work in the music over the final credits. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Mr. Hill for his time and engagement with my article.

<sup>30</sup>For further technical descriptions of musical themes, see Pugliese 75.

neighbors welcome him as the new celebrity can be considered as the very beginning of Luciano's illusion or fantasy. Luciano's facial expression and eyes communicate that he now believes he is part of the reality show. In Desplat's CD *Reality*, the musical theme that is played in this scene is titled *L'illusione* ('The Illusion') and returns at the end of the film (*Finale*), when Luciano has finally entered the Big Brother house. Here his illusion is at its peak, and the filmmaker's camera starts slowly its movement away from Luciano's laughter. In *L'illusione* the first musical theme is revisited and fragmented, but then, more importantly, it slowly gives way and preponderance to the second theme, which is fully played in the final scene to intensify the moment and to remark how Luciano's journey into a world of fantasy is now complete.

There are other instances in which the music contributes to setting the tone and creating an atmosphere that leads the spectator to perceive a certain situation either as disquieting or relaxing. For instance, when Luciano believes that he is being observed by the *Big Brother's* camera's eye, the music, with its harp, flute and strings' pizzicato, creates an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. All is fragmented, and, as Neonato suggests, chromaticisms and strings tremolos convey a sense of danger, thus connoting Luciano's fantasy as unsettling. Furthermore, when Luciano enters the house, the electronic music, with its clear underlying "loop" (a pattern that repeats itself obsessively) creates a peaceful sense of final destination that is yet punctuated by some controversial elements like dissonances and noise effects. One senses the "abyss of the dream:" it is ultimately a dangerous peace and a disquieting hypnosis. The arrival in the house considered as the entrance in the artificial and fictitious world of the reality show is indeed musically marked as troubling. Finally, it is significant that, at the beginning of the final credits, the music returns to the first theme (first scene), as to give a sort of circular closure and to invite the spectator to return to reality, with both its fairy-tale dreams and its ordinary hectic life.

### Conclusions

The film *Reality* offers two different ways of interpreting the relationship between reality and fiction, depending on whether one considers diegetic or extra-diegetic elements. The spectator, in fact, may get absorbed and lost in Luciano's story, and ultimately in his apparent confusion between reality and fiction, and, perhaps, conclude that

indeed Luciano's reality (a happy one) is the life he lives within the reality show. This view would agree with Debord's idea, articulated by Kaplan, that "in the new social reality, personal identity has shifted its location: no longer based in one's roles as citizen or worker with a practical involvement in the production of a shared social world, it instead has become centered in consumption and the vicarious satisfactions of identifying with stars and celebrities" (463). Although this spectacle appears to be pervasive and seamless, the film hints, through the instances of estrangement that we have examined, at a desire and possibility of distinguishing between reality and fiction, between the world of the protagonist and the world of the author, and between the world of cinema, with its "privileged" perspective, and the world of TV.<sup>31</sup> To the advantage of familiar space and local economy, the film seems to critique the globalized economy represented by the mall and the water park,<sup>32</sup> as well as by the global and globalized *Big Brother* reality TV show—a media franchise whose format, only slightly modified to fit different cultural contexts, has reached over fifty-four countries across the world (Toni Johnson-Woods 1–37). Ultimately, with his critique of reality shows, Garrone seems to offer cinema as a medium to detect the pitfalls of contemporary capitalist society and to provide a sort of moral lesson.

The estranging effects of both Luciano's laughter and the formal decisions structuring visual diegesis can be considered moments of rupture and *détournement* of the spectacle. Garrone may in fact come closer to be, as Debord would put it, "the master and possessor of his world which is history and existing as consciousness of his game" (thesis 74). To follow Debord's idea of revolutionary action, we are left wondering if this attempt at regaining control of life will find other individuals, who, in the world of cinema, would be willing to dispense with alienation and separation, and to generate a collective awareness of the distinction between reality and its spectacle.

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<sup>31</sup>Such a position may unjustly engender critiques of TV as "an instrument of absolute alienation," particularly in the form of a reality TV shows, "a place of fake values, the new paradise of excessive consumption" (G. C. 57). Such a critique is tied to the debate regarding the advent of television and the following penalization of cinema production. See Marcus, *After Fellini* 6; Micciché; Brunetta; Landy; Vitti.

<sup>32</sup>The mall is the place where Luciano's journey towards the loss of his identity begins. Later in the film, the water park, another symbol of global economy, becomes the stage of a mean joke that leads Luciano to believe that he has been finally called to participate in the *Big Brother* show.

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