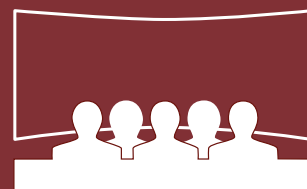


IL DOCUMENTARIO ITALIANO: MODELLI, POETICHE, ESITI

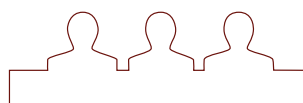
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E LAURA RASCAROLI



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THE HAPTIC DOCUMENTARIES OF SILVIO SOLDINI

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Silvio Soldini's documentaries, like many of his feature films, focus on the representations of marginalized groups, on the unveiling of non-mainstream Italian realities and on the interweaving of multiple narratives that resist resolution. In this article, I consider three of Soldini's more recent documentaries, "Per altri occhi", "Tre Milano", and "Il fiume ha sempre ragione", focusing particularly on how Soldini engages us in a form of active viewing that draws attention not just to the visual but to other senses, eliciting affective response and providing space for reflection on ways of being in the world.

KEYWORDS

Silvio Soldini; Italian documentary; slow cinema; sensory studies; haptic visuality

Silvio Soldini's documentary aesthetic has its roots in his experiences studying film at New York University in the early 1980s, where he was exposed not only to a wide array of films, but also to their formal elements in a course on the history of documentary filmmaking¹. He developed an affinity for some of the great filmmakers of the documentary canon, such as Joris Ivens and Robert Flaherty, and in particular for the intimacy of Werner Herzog's early documentaries. Soldini's documentaries align him with several threads in the broadly defined Italian documentary tradition, and in particular with observational documentaries attuned with the anthropological observation of local customs theorized by Ernesto de Martino and associated with filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Michelangelo Antonioni, the latter one of Soldini's continual points of reference². The ongoing debates in Italy over the definition of documentary film, its content, aesthetics, and relationship to "the real" have been synthesized in a number of important critical works in both Italian and English³. In his tome on the history of the Italian documentary, Bertozzi resists a single definition of the genre, highlighting

¹ Malanga, 1998: 26.

² See Caminati; Sassi, 2017: 366-367.

³ See Angelone; Clò, 2011; Sorlin, 2006; Bertozzi, 2000; Bertozzi, 2008.

its multiplicity, fluidity, relationality, and resistance to claims to represent absolute truths⁴. One of the prevailing intentions of the contemporary Italian documentary is the desire to capture the many aspects of the national and cultural identities and regional facets of Italy, as well as to privilege marginality and diversity that often do not find space in mainstream cinema⁵. Formally, these works explicitly reject certain televisual and prevailing mainstream formats⁶. Soldini's documentaries, like many of his feature films share these characteristics. In creating a space for marginalized voices and for the unveiling of non-mainstream realities, he interweaves multiple narratives that resist resolution. In an effort to provide new perspectives on contemporary Italy, he engages in a relational documentary practice that allows spectators «to hear people tell their stories and observe their lives instead of being told what they think and the meaning of their behavior»⁷.

Soldini thrives on an approach that involves investigation and discovery, claiming that one of the most enjoyable aspects of this kind of filmmaking is that «the documentary remains a space in which you can discover new things. Above all you come in contact with experiences and realities that you would otherwise never have known or that you would have approached in a most superficial manner»⁸. Roberto Nepoti acknowledges the attraction of the documentary to a feature filmmaker: «[...] many filmmakers choose the documentary mode precisely to make a first-person cinema that frees them from the obligation to tell a story, permitting them to express more freely an ethical point of view»⁹. For Soldini, the making of documentaries has functioned as a laboratory of sorts where he experiments with unfamiliar contexts and different cinematic techniques, some of which plant the seed for future feature films or emerge from them. Indeed, we need only think of the most obvious relationships between the documentary *Rom tour* (1999) and the feature film *Un'anima divisa in due (A Soul Split in Two)*, (1993) or the documentary *Per altri occhi (Through Other Eyes)*, (2013) and his most recent film *Il colore nascosto delle cose (Emma)*, (2017). His first six documentaries, which I explore in depth in previous work on Soldini, address a range of social and historical issues: a psychiatric day hospital in *Voci celate (Hidden Voices)*, (1986); the closing of a factory and the end of an era in *Fabbrica sospesa (The Shut-Down Factory)*, (1987); the changing landscape of a region in *Made in Lombardia (Made in Lombardy)*, (1996); the portrayal of a group of young rock musicians in Milan in *Musiche bruciano (Burning Music)*, (1991); the complexity of issues that young people face today in *Il futuro alle spalle – Voci da un'età inquitèa (Back to the Future)*, (1998); the historical background and contemporary situation of the Rom communities in Florence in *Rom tour*¹⁰. These documentaries adhere to the kind of ethnographic film described by Bill Nichols in *The Ethnographer's Tale*: evoking rather than representing, they move beyond hierarchical structures designed for the extraction of knowledge (i.e. the interview, the infor-

⁴ Bertozzi, 2008: 17-19.

⁵ Angelone; Clò, 2011: 84.

⁶ Angelone; Clò, 2011: 85.

⁷ Ruby, 1991: 51.

⁸ Malanga, 1998: 26. My translation.

⁹ Bertozzi, 2000: 416. My translation.

¹⁰ Luciano, 2008: 27-55.

mant, or the case study) to more participatory encounters and to a repetitive, poetic form of filmic organization that replaces a linear model with one that employs repetition and associative editing¹¹. In his crafting of these compelling, investigative works Soldini juxtaposes the worlds of the people under observation, framing and editing the images in a way that incrementally leads the spectator to a partial understanding of the segment of society or event under scrutiny.

In my study of Soldini's first six documentaries, I consider them to be both anthropological investigations and journey documentaries, as theorized by Stella Bruzzi and others, who maintain that the journey *topos* can result in a more intellectual, self-reflexive kind of film¹². Journey films are structured around encounters and meetings, and multiple subjective visions are represented as the film "travels" in search of people and voices. The mobility of the camera and the repetitive use of a variety of means of transport to drive the narrative include the spectator in these journeys. For Soldini cinema is above all a medium that mobilizes images and is founded on images: «I think that my cinema was born from a love for images more than from the desire to tell stories»¹³. My earlier work on Soldini engaged in close readings that focused primarily on images and on the senses that we most immediately associate with cinema: the visual and the aural. Such readings do not acknowledge that we can also see or know through other senses and sensibilities, and that cinema and cinematic framing can also engage the viewer in haptic experiences, reminding us that our awareness of the world occurs materially and is enhanced through touch. Haptic visuality, as defined by Laura Marks, implies a closer form of looking which tends to «rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture»¹⁴.

In this article, I consider three of Soldini's recent documentaries, paying particular attention to a heightened level of sensoriality that results from his attention to the haptic. Two of them, *Per altri occhi* and *Tre Milano* (*Three Milans*, 2015) – his contribution to the collective film *Milano 2015* (2015, by Silvio Soldini, Walter Veltroni, Cristina Capotondi, Giorgio Diritti, Roberto Bolle, and Stefano Roberto Bellisari) –, join his family of choral documentaries. The third, *Il fiume ha sempre ragione* (*The River is Always Right*, 2016), is instead a portrait film focusing on two artisans that shares much with his earlier *Quattro giorni con Vivian* (*Four Days with Vivian*, 2008). The three films in question embrace the techniques of Soldini's signature anthropological and journey style, framing and editing in a way that incrementally drip feeds information. My readings of the films focus particularly on how Soldini engages us in a form of active viewing that draws attention to other senses and that breaks down the boundaries between the viewer and the film, resulting in an embodied experience. In essence, the films elicit an affective response and provide space for reflection on other ways of being in the world.

¹¹ Nichols, 1994: 73.

¹² Bruzzi, 2000: 99.

¹³ Vecchi; Zambelli, 1985: 56.

¹⁴ Marks, 2002: 162.

I. HAPTIC PERCEPTION

The term haptic, from the Greek “suitable to touch”, was first coined by the German psychologist Max Dessoir in 1892, when suggesting a name for a branch of academic research into the sense of touch along the same lines that acoustics and optics refer to studies related to the senses of sound and sight. In 1962, in his fundamental article on active touch, James Gibson highlighted the active element of a sense previously studied as a purely passive or receptive channel. Re-defining active touch as tactile scanning, analogous to ocular scanning, he suggested that many properties of the adjacent environment can be perceived in the absence of vision¹⁵. More recently, Mark Paterson has elevated the status of the haptic in his interdisciplinary study of touch, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies*. Paterson posits the role of touching and feeling as part of the fabric of everyday, embodied experience¹⁶. The experiencing of one’s own body as a body is reliant on touch. He also argues for the acknowledgment of the relationship between the visual and the haptic: we can have an idea of what something at a visual distance can feel like, but it is not until we actually touch the thing that we know for sure. Touch therefore is corrective to vision or possibly affirming to vision. Recent scholarship in sensory studies that focus on the haptic also posits the notion of two modes of seeing, visually and kinaesthetically, their corresponding distant and near encounters, and their connectivity¹⁷. Laura Marks attempts to «restore a flow between the haptic and optical»¹⁸. She defines haptic perception as «the combination of tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies»¹⁹. But one mode of seeing, she insists, does not exclude the other; both the optical and the haptic are essential to most processes of seeing. Rather than standing in opposition to each other they engage in a dialogical, symbiotic relationship offering the viewer the opportunity to alternate between them, moving «from far to near, from solely optical to multisensory»²⁰. Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* first published in 1939, draws attention to «the desire of the present-day masses to “get closer” to things spatially and humanly»²¹. This desire is fulfilled by the haptic quality of cinema that, according to Noël Burch, provides the spatial illusion that leads a viewer to believe that the photographed objects and actors are in fact touchable, as if they existed in real space²². At the same time, Benjamin evokes the haptical/optical, or the near and distant distinction, by way of a metaphor that distinguishes the painter from the cameraman. The painter maintains a natural distance from reality, thus providing a totalizing image. The cameraman, on the other hand, much like a surgeon, comes so close as to not only touch but indeed penetrate the

¹⁵ Gibson, 1962: 477.

¹⁶ Paterson, 2007.

¹⁷ See Howes, 2005; Howes, 2014 for multidisciplinary discussions on the growing field of sensory studies.

¹⁸ Marks, 2002: XIII.

¹⁹ Marks, 2002: 2.

²⁰ Marks, 2002: 3.

²¹ Benjamin, 2003: 255.

²² Lant, 1995: 71.

surface of that reality, providing an image that at times needs to be reconstituted by the viewer²³. As Antonia Lant asserts, cinema is haptic both because of the cameraman's touching or penetration of the world, like the surgeon's internal handling of the body, and because of film's physical impact on the viewer²⁴. Haptic viewing, as Marks and Lant both suggest, thus accounts for an embodied, emotional experience.

Giuliana Bruno also returns to Benjamin's metaphor in her consideration of the reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between the senses and the emotional cinematic experience in *Atlas of Emotions*:

This view does not therefore consider sight and touch to be in opposition. The eye itself can caress, and be caressed. Thinking of the haptic as inseparable from the optic was the basis for a modern incarnation of this notion, in which an actual reciprocity is operative. In Benjaminian fashion with awareness of the "sense" of the cinematic experience this construction took the mechanical habit of a tactile vision and an optical touch.²⁵

Soldini's cinema plays on this interaction between the far and the near, the optical and the haptic. He (like other filmmakers such as Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Krzysztof Kieslowski) has repeatedly drawn attention to other senses, and particularly to the haptic, through the attention given to hands and to the objects they touch. While there is no single organ identified with touch, the hands are identifiable with the tactile and the use of close-ups can communicate the age, ethnicity or emotional state of a character, or set the stage for the action of an entire film. Deleuze, in describing the sense of touch in Robert Bresson's film *Pickpocket* (Id., 1959), writes, «[t]he hand doubles its prehensile function (as object) by a connective function (of space): but from that moment it is the whole eye which doubles its optical function a specifically 'grabbing' (*haptique*) one—a touching which is specific to the gaze»²⁶. In many of Soldini's films we find frequent instances of a "touching" gaze that caresses the surface of the image. *Un'anima divisa in due*, for example, opens on a male hand fingering a lipstick, an object which synecdochally substitutes the film's female protagonist and pre-emptly the film's unfolding of a relationship. In *Le acrobate* (*Acrobats*, 1997) the opening close-up focuses on a hand ritualistically removing a tooth from underneath a glass and replacing it with money, followed by a note being written by hand. In these cases, as in others, Soldini diminishes distance, and brings us closer to things. His characters are introduced by their hands and come to know things through the objects that they touch, objects that are often passed from hand to hand, handed off, or left behind.

²³ Benjamin, 2003: 263.

²⁴ Lant, 1995: 69.

²⁵ Bruno, 2002: 252.

²⁶ Deleuze, 1969: 260.

II. *PER ALTRI OCCHI*: SEEING DIFFERENTLY

Per altri occhi – whose very subject matter, the world of the blind, draws attention to different ways of seeing, based on a reliance on other senses – is our starting point for exploring the haptic.

Made in collaboration with Giorgio Garini, *Per altri occhi* was motivated by that same curiosity for unknown worlds that motivated films such as *Voci celate* or *Rom tour*. In this case, the film was born from Soldini's personal encounter with a physiotherapist he consulted to help cure a back problem. Soldini was unaware that Enrico was blind until well into the session. The personal stories that Enrico shared in the course of his six consults – and in particular his lightness, self-irony and self-sufficiency – sparked Soldini's curiosity. Initially through Enrico and subsequently with Garini, Soldini came in contact with a number of other blind individuals who helped him better understand the world of the "non-seeing", and became the characters of his choral documentary: Giovanni, a small businessman who loves to ski; Gemma, who plays the cello but is also a competitive skier; Felice, a sculptor who also plays baseball (and who will become the sole subject of Soldini's subsequent documentary, *Un albero indiano*); Luca, a musician who is also a photographer; Loredana, an operator who practices archery; Mario, a retired sportsman; Piero, an IT consultant; Claudio and Michela, a blind couple who run their own radio station, and who perspicaciously and ironically recount stories of their objectification by others.

The film is framed by opening and closing black screens that correspond to the blackness that our imaginary associates with blindness – though seeing black is itself revealed to be one of the misconceptions that seeing people have of the blind world. In the film's opening scenes, we simply observe three of the protagonists undertaking daily routines, which are familiar to the world of the sighted: shaving, walking to work, rigging a sailboat, and taking a photograph. While we imagine that they are blind because of the topic of the film, there is nothing in the camera's capturing of their movements that suggests this – the film is constructed around the dismantling of these mysteries and the progressive discovery of their worlds. As in Soldini's earlier documentaries, in *Per altri occhi* the cast of characters is slowly introduced through snapshots of their lives, with the camera then cutting away and temporarily abandoning them only to return later so that the spectator experiences a sensation of slowly becoming acquainted with them. This incremental familiarization means that, as the film progresses, our relationship with each protagonist becomes increasingly intimate and revelatory and follows a pattern of sorts; the spectator is initially surprised by the exceptional abilities of those who cannot see, that is abilities that we normally assume are dependent on the visual sense (they can sail, ski, take photographs, sculpt, and practice archery). We slowly come to understand the "how" of these feats but also the challenges, strategies and coping mechanisms involved in negotiating everyday life. The documentary ultimately turns from material illustration to cerebral interpretation, leaving space to the protagonists to express through anecdote, memory or reflection, a range of attitudes and emotions associated with the different ways that being blind has impacted on each of their lives.

Fig. 1 - Seeing differently
in "Per altri occhi" (2013),
Silvio Soldini.



The nature of the subject the film explores and of its protagonists mean that Soldini and Garini also embrace different strategies in their filming. In contrast to their previous documentaries, where they remained diegetically “outside”, Soldini and Garini modestly enter the film itself, through their responses to questions or requests heard offscreen and the visual intrusion into screen space – their assisting in a sailing manoeuvre that almost causes a capsize, Soldini’s fingering Felice’s sculpture as he himself experiences “seeing” differently through this active touching (*fig. 1*). The words (which reach us aurally) or gestures from the margins of the frame break one of the codes of traditional observational documentary that keeps the director outside the text. At the same time this breaking of the code is humbling and levelling; it disrupts the hierarchy between filmmaker and filmed subject and creates the level of intimacy required to enter the protagonists’ physical and psychological spaces.

It is in representing these spaces that Soldini’s camera proceeds haptically in its attempt to offer snapshots of the protagonists’ non-visual lives to the viewer and to engage the viewer in these lives. The camera moves slowly, often pausing as it captures in detail the many levels of haptic perception at play in negotiating the everyday, for example, through the close-up of hands, which reach out to locate the olive oil bottle on a kitchen shelf, or feel the folds of bills to perceive their value, or touch the panel of doorbells in search of the right one to access a building. Equally necessary to the blind negotiation of life is what is known as extended physiological proprioception, as we are made to perform tasks by feeling through objects like the spoon used to fill the coffee maker, or the utensil used in stirring on the stovetop, or the walking stick that taps the pavement, or the skis whose bottoms hug the slopes, or the sail that flaps in the wind. But touch is not just the sense that those who cannot see must rely on, it also becomes the sense that can enhance or even allow a better way of seeing: there are many instances in the film where the camera closes in on the hands of those who sculpt feeling the material details of the marble or those who “see” the sculptures better by forging their fingers into the grooves. Hence, central to the film is a reconsideration of the privileging of vision as the

sense that dominates our understanding of the world, particularly today when we live in a world completely dominated by images²⁷. That the world is made for the sighted and the continued dangers or obstacles this attitude poses for non-seers is a point made by the film and expressed by the characters: slopes for the disabled are actually dangerous for the blind who count on haptically feeling edges and boundaries as they walk the city streets and while technology on the one hand has vastly improved methods of reading or writing, it also provides new challenges in the form of touch-screen technology with its complex video displays.

As viewers, the most blatant challenge to our conventional understanding of sight is presented through the character of Luca, the musician/photographer. Photography (like filmmaking) is by definition a “visual” art seemingly intrinsically linked to the act of seeing. The obvious question we ask when we first see Luca holding a camera, pointing and taking a picture is how can a blind person possibly take photographs? (*fig. 2*) Luca’s explanation lies in his use of intuition and inexplicable sensations that move him to take his pictures. For instance, a forest shot is provoked by the sense of the trees moving towards him. Shots are also provoked by feeling the imposing presence of the mountain or the emotion of the city of Paris below him from atop the Eiffel tower, or sensing an unknown material presence on Castel Sant’Angelo. Equally incongruous seems the ability of other characters to offer visual descriptions of landscapes, pictures, sculptures, and television shows, all of which lead us to question our assumptions that the image belongs exclusively to those who see. The title of the film *Per altri occhi* refers specifically then to the multiple ways in which we see, and Soldini’s characters see, and in turn reminds us or teaches us to see, not just through our eyes but through memories, dreams, and intuition. Henri Bergson’s notion of memory informs the different ways of seeing experienced by the protagonists. Bergson in his study *Matter and Memory*, distinguishes two forms of memory, habit memory which is aligned with bodily perception, and pure memory, which accounts for the survival of personal memories that inhabit the unconscious²⁸. The former memory, assists in negotiating the pragmatic needs of the everyday and is recalled by what we see and hear, but also by touch and smell. It is habit memory for example, that, through repetition and reliance of olfactory (the smell of a bakery) and tactile receptors, allows Fe-

²⁷ The critique of the privileging of vision or visualism and its relationship to the practice and the construction of knowledge is a widespread contemporary debate. Martin Jay in his book *Downcast Eyes* (1993) suggests that, until the twentieth century, vision within Western culture enjoyed a privileged status as a source of knowledge about the world. From early Greek philosophy onwards, questions concerning the acquisition of knowledge have frequently been reduced to the condition of having seen. Recent literature in the anthropology of the senses has established that vision is cultural, and that different cultures hold a very different hierarchy for the senses than the Western, visualist tradition (e.g. Howes 2005, 2014). In their essay *The Mind’s Eye*, Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine Grontkowski (1983) challenge, from a feminist perspective, the traditional hierarchy in Western thought that intertwines vision and knowledge. Accounts of visualism and the image excesses of visual culture have figured within much postmodern critique of Western technoculture. In her work *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*, Cristina Grasseni (2007) proposes a new concept of vision that recontextualizes the critique of visualism building upon the recent literature on the anthropology of the senses.

²⁸ Bergson, 1900.

Fig. 2 - Intuiting the image
in "Per altri occhi" (2013),
Silvio Soldini.



lice to comfortably navigate a previously unfamiliar city, or Giovanni to find his pair of socks and Enrico to remember an old home through the smell of dampness. Pure memory comes to us in less structured, non-habitualized forms, unexpectedly, when we recall something unrelated to our present situation, perhaps in a state of sleeping or daydreaming, like the memory of the blues and greens of a panorama that unexpectedly come back to one of the protagonists and that thus allows him to see the colours he can no longer "see".

While on the one hand the film's characters themselves bring us incrementally closer to an understanding of their worlds, Soldini goes a step further through a deliberate haptic aesthetic choice that engages us in a form of active viewing. In three distinct moments in the film Soldini interrupts the visual storytelling with intervals of many seconds of prolonged blackness. The camera is turned off, but the action continues and, as viewers, we are left to experience the protagonists' harrowing challenges of moving from one metro line to another (as in the case of Enrico who twice found this a life-threatening experience), of meeting up with friends in the street, and of sailing in a regatta without visual clues but through the use of the other senses. In each of these scenes, the boundaries between us and the film become porous, and we experience the film in a heightened way. Movement and action are motivated only by sounds, voices or other sensory clues that disorient us as viewers and at the same time allow us to experience briefly the challenges of living as blind.

In his approach to blindness, Soldini chose deliberately not to focus on blindness as handicap, or on blind people for whom blindness proved to present insurmountable challenges. His autonomous and self-sufficient antiheroes face their blindness with courage and persistence. Across these intersecting encounters we discover and experience a different world that goes beyond the stereotype of the white stick and the guide dog. Indeed, we are presented with a world governed by passion – be that a passion sparked by the creation of music, sensorial photography, the sensation of the wind that fills the sails or the snow that slips beneath the skis, or the mastery of the sport of archery. In the next to final sequence, Giovanni skis down the mountain following the

Fig. 3 - Emotion experienced haptically in "Per altri occhi" (2013), Silvio Soldini.



instructor distancing himself from us visually, and we watch him in that imposing landscape, in the blinding white snow. Despite our increasing visual detachment, we can still hear the orienting cries of his instructor, and feel the great sense of liberty that soaring down the mountain allots (*fig. 3*). This, like so many other scenes in Soldini's film, is one of pure emotion, experienced haptically, transferred from the skin of the screen to the body of the viewer.

III. *TRE MILANO*: THE HAPTIC CITY

A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.²⁹

Tre Milano is Soldini's contribution to the collective film *Milano 2015*, which was envisaged as a re-interpretation of Ermanno Olmi's *Milano '83* (1983), presented at the 40th Venice Film Festival. The idea for the 2015 collective work was to capture and reinterpret the stratified identity of contemporary Milan through characters, places, feelings, and reflections on the past and present. The other collaborators to the film project were the filmmakers Giorgio Diritti and Walter Veltroni and three first-time directors with other artistic backgrounds: the actor Cristiana Capotondi, the dancer Roberto Bolle, and the singer and musician Elio. In *Tre Milano* Soldini returns to film his native city and location of many of his films, from his first mid-length feature films onward: the nocturnal Milan of the mid-1980s in *Paesaggio con figure* (*Landscape with Figures*, 1983) and *Giulia in ottobre* (*Giulia in October*, 1985); the timeless Milan of the Navigli quarter in *D'estate* (*In Summer*, 1994); the "Milano da bere" of his first full-length film, *L'aria serena dell'ovest* (*The Serene Air of the West*, 1990); the oppressive

²⁹ Calvino, 1972: 10-11.

Fig. 4 - The affection of intertwined hands in "Tre Milano" (2015), Silvio Soldini.



and intolerant Milan of *Anima divisa in due*; and, following a break, the Milan of the depressed economic years in *Cosa voglio di più* (*Come Undone*, 2011), a city of hour motels and claustrophobic interiors. In *Tre Milano*, we traverse the contemporary changing landscape of the urban metropolis, a city like Calvino's invisible city of Zaira cited at the beginning of this section, that contains its past, its present and its future in its materiality.

Soldini narrates the city following his recognizable pattern of intersecting stories. The "tre" in the title refers to the three characters, but also to their three very different ways of living the city. Armando is someone Soldini already knew, and indeed who featured as a minor character in *Per altri occhi*: a tram driver who navigates the city everyday on Milan's historical and timeless mode of transport. Kirba represents the new Milan, a second-generation Eritrean woman, who criss-crosses Milan on her bicycle engaging with some of the city's contemporary challenges and realities. The third protagonist, Marco Pho Grassi, is an artist, with a background in street art, who has his studio in an ex-warehouse and whose current artistic production is contaminated by fragments of this city. As the film cuts between the three narratives, it literally travels across the city, in a spatial journey that juxtaposes the city's past and its present through a haptic visuality that draws attention to the surface of things. It is a mobile film that points to the human engagement of its inhabitants who live it, who literally built it from the ground up, a "manual" film that acknowledges the industriousness and *mano d'opera* of the present and the past.

The film opens on an external shot of tram line 33, the historic tram that provides a "slow" alternative way of traversing the city. Unlike the metro line that invisibly and rapidly brings its commuters from destination to destination, the tram skims the city's surface tracing the history and transformation of its urban landscape. Our initial encounter with its riders is not with their faces, but with their hands, close-up shots of hands holding on to handgrips for support, hands intertwined in affection (*fig. 4*), the guiding hand of the driver resting on the tram's controls. This haptic representation suggests the range of age and ethnicity of the city's inhabitants and a changing demography. As the camera di-

Fig. 5 - Framing and mapping the city in "Tre Milano" (2015), Silvio Soldini.



rects our gazes outside up to the wires that connect the city, and down to street level, the film unfolds Milan's material architectural history, its urban design and transformation. The cranes signal a city under construction, while the cityscape depicts a past that seems to live in an accepted equilibrium with the present, dignified historical buildings coexist with post-war apartment buildings and the new recognizable skyscrapers (from Torre Velasca to the Bosco Verticale). It is a filmic map captured through the frames of the tram window and accompanied by the rhythmic sound of the tram-wheels on the rails (*fig. 5*).

The film cuts to other hands, those of Marco, the artist whose manual and manually creative labour is the focus of Soldini's camera. We accompany Marco from the outside spaces where he strips outdated posters off the city walls and collects found objects such as old wooden pallets and rusted metal offered up by the urban environment. He brings them to his studio, a recycled space in its own right, the transformed ex-industrial space which recalls the city's past of manual labour, and where, like a true found footage artist, he transforms those urban treasures, with brushes, sponges and spray cans and adapted techniques of photo mechanics, into expressive abstract paintings (*fig. 6*). Through Marco's adaptation, Soldini acknowledges that «recycling implies the redefinition of processes of focalization as well as the deconstruction of the original meaning; documentary film is a laboratory of gazes dedicated to the idea that it is possible to rework buried fragments, to fill the gap between distant acts of seeing and a more recent eagerness to know»³⁰.

Kimbra's work engages her with a transforming social and demographic space; she helps women gain access to the work place and meets with young second generation Milanese, the so-called new Italians, members of the Rete G2 who identify themselves as children of immigrants rather than as immigrants: "G2" does not stand "for second generation of immigrants" but for "second generation of immigrations", which sees immigration as a process that is transforming and will continue to transform Italy. With varying relationships to their roots, these young people whose skin, that exterior tactile surface, presupposes an identity that is not always their own, have different ways of working through

³⁰ Bertozzi, 2011: 93.

Fig. 6 - Recycling images in
 "Tre Milano" (2015),
 Silvio Soldini.



their transcultural issues as they hope for a more tolerant and less racist society. Kirba cycles to one final spot, the Ciclofficina Stecca, in the Isola quarter of Milan, in the shadow of the reflective Unicredit tower and at the end of the road for tram 33. Here the workmanship, creativity and industriousness that is part of the city's history endures as she joins others who want to learn to repair their own bicycles but also to build things with their hands, sawing and sanding pieces of wood destined for use.

In his twenty-minute contribution to this collective film, Soldini's gaze on Milan is on a less alienating city, lighter, more welcoming, than the Milan we saw in some of his previous films. At the end of the film Soldini locates his artist Marco, standing in an abandoned ex-industrial space, a space that confirms what Erly Vieira sees as the fate of all urban landscapes: «[...] to become ruins and eventually to become the affective memories of those who experienced them as they are replaced by new, also transient edifices soon to be inhabited»³¹. On the abandoned railroad tracks in south Milan, Marco points his camera back towards the existing urban landscape, one that we cannot quite touch, in the distance slightly out of reach, like the target that Armando's blind archers aim at. Through a camera that caresses the surfaces, and the hands and faces of his characters, Soldini offers us the city of his affective memories, a city like its inhabitants, in a constant state of flux, an urban space where the past meets the present in a space of recycling, renewal and rebirth.

IV. IL FIUME HA SEMPRE RAGIONE: FLOW CINEMA

Il fiume ha sempre ragione is a film that inherits the rhythm of Soldini's earlier *Quattro giorni con Vivian* (l.t.: *Four Days with Vivian*, 2008), a portrait of Vivian Lamarque. *Vivian* is a moving film, that unmasks a clear affinity between poet and filmmaker. It is a film woven by Soldini's intimate close-ups of facial expressions and of hands embracing objects: warm ones like books, photos, statuettes, and poetry notebooks. The film is filtered through two gazes: that of the

³¹ Vieira, 2016: 523.

poet, who takes us by the hand and leads us through the external and internal spaces of her past and present life, and that of the filmmaker that follows her. Walking through her Milan and revisiting her former homes and gardens, she introduces us to flowers and words. Gardening becomes a haptic metaphor for the work of the poet, the cultivation of her plants is like the repetitive rewriting of her poems, the search for the words often tossed away like the little branches and flowers tossed in the garbage bin at the cemetery. Vivian reorders and recycles, giving plants, words, and images their deserved “rebirth”.

A similar invited intrusion into the lives of two artists forms the basis of *Il fiume ha sempre ragione*. Soldini explains:

I tiptoed in and sat down in a corner to watch them, to try and understand, to capture the poetry of their work. A fascination with their work and the way they go about it was what drove me to make this film, but only by adjusting to their rhythm did I understand the strength of their bond with life, which makes them extraordinary characters, in their seemingly humble and profound humanity.³²

As the extended title of the film suggests, Soldini meanders among the lives and objects of two artisans, Alberto Casiraghy, a small art book creator from Osnaga, and Josef Weiss, a book restorer who lives in Mendrisio, in the Swiss Canton of Ticino. Moving seamlessly between the atelier of the two creators, havens so distant from the accelerated speeds and advanced technology of contemporary life, Soldini captures with deliberate slowness the time and care they dedicate to their respective, dying tactile professions.

We have encountered Casiraghy previously, in Soldini’s 1996 documentary *Made in Lombardy*. In it, Soldini’s camera travelled through the contrasting landscapes of Lombardy of the mid-1990s, stopping along the way to capture dreams and images of self-made men with unique visions of ways to forge a better future in a consumer-driven society. Amid the racket, confusion, and constant motion, the documentary foregrounds individuals who are trying to make a difference in their own small and often quiet ways, urging us all to do the same: to stop and listen, for example, to the running water of a stream, or to reflect on a poem by Alda Merini. It is in one of these havens off the beaten track of a frenetic Lombardy that we found Casiraghy then.

In this re-visitation we rediscover a slightly older Casiraghy, at work in his studio, in the company of collaborators – artists, poets, and friends – as he goes about his task of creating and crafting small customized books of aphorisms and poetry. Across the border, a slightly less loquacious Josef Weiss finds and restores dignity to old books methodically, with surgical precision. He cuts the paper, trims the edges, glues the covers, and restores the beauty to the books saving them from oblivion.

³² My translation from a press release on the film produced by Film - Echo, available online: http://biografilmfestival.com/guest/PRESSBOOK_IlFiumeHaSempreRagione.pdf [accessed Nov. 2018].

Fig. 7 - Fingering letters,
creating words in
"Il fiume ha sempre
ragione" (2016),
Silvio Soldini.



Fig. 8 - Guiding the needle
in "Il fiume ha sempre
ragione" (2016),
Silvio Soldini.



The film is a sensory experience framing the faces but more often the hands of Casiraghy and Weiss. As the camera moves close to the surface and lingers on the hands busily at work, we are transformed into participants in these acts of creation, apprentices of these vanishing professions. We are made to feel like we too are touching the cold, hard metal letters that Casiraghy is selecting, lining them up and creating words that together form poems (*fig. 7*). We feel the coarseness of the paper; it could be our hand that guides the needle that sews together the pages and the pen that adds colour to the cover (*fig. 8*). With Weiss, we partake in the dissection of an old book, we rip out the pages, recompose them, bind them into a new book. We are complicit in these two artisans' labour of love, nothing short of alchemy, as they transform letters into words into books, and transform worn out publications into dignified new editions.

Fig. 9 - Cradling objects
in "Il fiume ha sempre
ragione" (2016),
Silvio Soldini.



That same ethos and passion they dedicate to their art governs every aspect of their lives. Not always focused on the task at hand, Soldini's camera occasionally wanders among the objects and pictures in Alberto's and Josef's studios, objects occasionally picked up and held out toward us, cradled in their hands like old friends (*fig. 9*). Only occasionally we take a break from this creative activity to observe Josef's city from above or to walk along Alberto's river, the river that evokes an aphorism that becomes the title of the film, the river is always right, an acknowledgement of the natural order of things, of flow and slowness (*fig. 10*).

V. CONCLUSION: RE-MEMBERING AND REMEMBERING

Flow and slowness are two terms that can be applied to a different way of making and feeling cinema. The documentaries examined in this article achieve the effect described by Vieira in his discussion of body and flow in contemporary cinema. He writes that flow films

use a narrative strategy in which the sensory aspect is valued as a primordial dimension of the spectator's aesthetic experience [...] allowing the viewer to detect all of the sensory experiences that are inherent to the image. In other words, these films represent a different visual and auditory pedagogy – often associated with a trace of tactility in the image, what Laura Marks calls "haptic visuality" – that invites us to relearn how to watch and listen to a film.³³

Vieira highlights the value of multisensory viewing, explored by Marks and others. To learn to look at images through a multisensorial lens enhances the viewing experience and has always been at the heart of Soldini's cinema. In a piece that Soldini wrote for «Cineforum» in 1997 he described as such the multisensorial nature of the cinematic gaze:

³³ Vieira, 2016: 513.

Fig. 10 - Flow, slowness and the natural order of things in "Il fiume ha sempre ragione" (2016), Silvio Soldini.



The gaze does not depend only on the eye, but on all the senses. There are images that should be listened to more than looked at, others that cry out that we touch them, immerse ourselves in them, images that invade us and fill us, that move us, that make us think. The eye in the end does nothing more than find the best image for what the gaze "sees." It searches for a form, a movement, a music to recount that image, something singular and unutterable.³⁴

A haptic reading of Soldini's documentaries discussed in this article draws attention to the "nearness" rather than to the "distance" of Soldini's images. It points to the camera's potential to draw close, to skim the surface, to engage the viewer in the present or "now-ness" of the film. In these documentaries, Soldini deliberately diminishes distance, and brings us closer to bodies and things so that we may feel the worlds the documentaries introduce. The narratives are inhabited by material objects that the camera caresses and that we mimetically touch or handle – bills, walking sticks, sculptures, coarse pages, metal letters, or recycled posters. These objects indeed cry out to be touched, are touched, and touch the viewer. In these haptic films, the variety of textures recall and arouse sensations, sounds and colours. *Il fiume ha sempre ragione*, for example, embodies the viewer in the "re-remembering" of a process, of the tactile creation of one of Casiraghy's books, while in Tre Milano the viewer participates in the tearing down, recycling and reconstituting of urban products into new works of art. In *Per altri occhi*, the viewer identifies instead with the protagonists' own remembering of a lost colour or of the smell of a familiar place that becomes vital to seeing. This form of active viewing in turn dissolves the boundaries between the spectator and the film and allows us to experience the film in a heightened way, to move «from far to near, from solely optical to multisensory»³⁵.

³⁴ Soldini, 1997: 53. My translation.

³⁵ Marks, 2002: 3.

By extension, considering the haptic as an essential pairing to the optic, can provide a broader platform for the re-reading of contemporary Italian documentary, for relearning how to watch and listen to films. If, as viewers, we engage in a multisensory process that alternates between re-*membering* (resulting from a near-viewing tactile experience) and remembering (resulting from a more distant viewing cognitive experience), we embody the documentary maker's desire to reach out and touch marginal and diverse individuals and spaces and to be touched by them. As Giuliana Bruno eloquently suggests in *Atlas of Emotion*:

We come to perceive and understand the physical world by exploring it with our hands, our eyes and the movements of our bodies; our recollections and recognitions of the world are intimately related to those very movements we use to explore it [...]. Film becomes the reproducible memory of our kinesthetic view of space, and of the tactile exploration that makes up the intimate history of our emotional range.³⁶

³⁶ Bruno, 2002: 263.

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