

Marco Ferreri's films, strongly influenced by Buñuel via the screenwriter Rafael Azcona, are characterised by a mix of realism and a surreal sense of humour. After the initial exploration of marriage in *The Queen Bee* (1963) and *The Ape Woman* (1964), his exposés of contemporary middle-class mores continued through the 1960s and 70s with films such as *Dillinger Is Dead* (1968) and the notorious *La Grande Bouffe* (1973). In his films we encounter some of the best actors of the time, from Ugo Tognazzi, Michel Piccoli, Marcello Mastroianni, Annie Girardot and Catherine Deneuve, to a young Roberto Benigni. A very rare screening of *Dillinger Is Dead* forms part of an upcoming London retrospective of the late film-maker's oeuvre and what follows are various contemporary responses to the film by Italian writers and critics.



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Enduring provocations from one of cinema's singular voices



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Marco Ferreri

A man, a house, a pistol, a whole night. *Dillinger è morto*, like all films constructed in a dimension circumscribed by time and space, added up to a challenge. It's not just the risk of making a *kammerspiel* ("camera" cinema in every sense of the word), which obliges the spectator to develop a phenomenological and behavioural focus on characters; and it's not that much to do with the aspiration to accurately describe the micro-actions of an individual imprisoned within an area, a civilisation of objects and commodities. Ferreri's challenge lies in this silent, imploded revolution (like the pistol shots muffled by the pillow fired at his wife stuffed with sleeping pills) set instinctively and by chance, in isolation, within the four walls of an apartment. Rebellion or madness followed by a dream-like (and perhaps ironical, or even meta-cinematic) flight to the South Seas.

In *Dillinger* we see the full ripeness of Ferreri's poetics and aesthetics and at the same time a springboard towards a cinema less and less tied to the real but rather increasingly stylised and abstract. *Dillinger* is a long artistic performance. From the planning of the initial masks (a flash of surreal design) to the parallel between preparing food and re-assembling a pistol, and from the actions with the body (the shadow play in front of the super 8 screen) and on the body (the erotic scene with the maid) to the decoration of the weapon with white polka dots on a red background. Besides, behind it lies the hand of Mario Schifano, Ferreri's great friend. His painting *Futurismo Rivisitato* features prominently on the walls of the house. There's an underground slant at the core of this film, even though it's extremely narrative (in the sense of a perfect dramaturgy of images), where objects and human beings exchange roles. It is customary to see *Dillinger* as a film of rebellion, and the subsequent *Il seme dell'uomo* as a post-rebellion work. "Before the end" and "after the end", as Maurizio Grande suggests. But most likely there is no before and after. Ferreri's cinema has always been a great circle where movies, characters, events, and objects return. It's a frozen cinema where the sense of the End is imminent, but the conclusion is still out there and to come.

Bruno Di Marino

The film reconstructs a whole night in which an engineer is shut in (or locked in) at home until dawn. Therefore, it's a film about time and it's passing, in which, as it unfolds, cinema itself is the

main character. A system of portrayals and propositions is built up, in which the machine-like relationship between shooting, characters, space, and spectators is the protagonist.

Michel Piccoli's night is divided into various moments, and parts or "sections" (temporal and behavioural) which interfere with each other: the painstaking preparation of a tasty dinner; the recovery and restoration of an old pistol; the relationship with his wife and the maid; the link with the past and its reflection (the home movies). These parts and moments are variously combined in a circle that is enveloped, marked, and underlined by long sequence shots that "contain" the main character, objects, minimum, imperceptible events and the gigantic ones too, and finally, time, the atmosphere of suspense, and shattered and fragmented gestures.

The first dimension of this long night of isolation is established by the relationship between the man, space, objects, and the time/duration of the ceaseless transformation of this relationship with the objects. Initially besieged by the quantitative wealth and potential (and therefore concrete) aggressiveness of the objects, the man gradually regains his own interior dimension in an "incredible" gesture (anti-logical and anti-naturalistic) of liberation: the murder of his sleeping wife – carried out almost to "try out" the old revolver that he'd found and restored, almost, and only, for the fun and "curiosity" of pulling the trigger.

Maurizio Grande, *Marco Ferreri, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1975*

Love, sex, death, the Vietnam war, the lure of fantastic places roll past the man's eyes via images in illustrated magazines, on TV, and at the cinema. This relationship based on fascination totally intrigues him. Probably, he's lost the dimension of depth: everything that can be seen and moves is real. [...]

While the objects and reified characters of reality interest him from standpoint of efficiency and their relationship between form and use, the characters on the screen arouse emotional reactions in him: tenderness, desire, happiness. So for this man, only images generated by the film projector or the TV screen really exist. But when this relationship of fascination is interrupted, melancholy too exists. Beyond the continuum of projected images, one should gauge with a second world that is closed, finite, and even unrecognisable, where the more engulfing



movement becomes, the more it loses its meaning, where moving among objects always means distancing oneself from them to the point of having a hold on them.

[...] *Dillinger è morto* thus presents a time span, a story, and characters and situations that are highly concrete. Everything is recognisable, understandable, and consistent, and this is miraculous if we consider that no film is more abstract, rarefied, and constructed than this "theorem" about a man who spends a night eating, drinking, making love, moving around the house, and finally shoots his wife with a revolver and then goes away at dawn when everyone is waking up. But with its beautiful bright colours, imperceptible tracking shots, long takes, the pace of its shooting, its memories, and its voids and abundances, this film speaks more than ever about itself, condemning the use of the "apologue" and of characters as an excuse, and presents itself as a new and provocative incursion into the world of the filmmaker's poetics.

Enzo Ungari, *Lo spazio della malinconia in "Cinema & film", n. 7-8, 1969*

In *Dillinger*, the vital functions of meat, food, and sex that have always been very prominent in Ferreri's cinema, become rituals for killing time, expressions of a mortuary compulsion for repetition. Where there is despairing boredom and neurotic obsession rather than actual need, eating and making

love only represent automatic gestures for purposes of exorcism. We eat to forget, says the grocer Mario in *Break-up*. We also eat, without success, to overcome the fear of death. But food in *Dillinger* is mainly portrayed as a still life, composed according to criteria of chromatic assonance and dissonance. Transposition onto female flash to be licked, in *Dillinger* just as in *Break-up*, only serves to extend this devitalised game of absences, and of assimilation of the organic within the inorganic.

Stefania Parigi, *Il corpo pneumatico in Marco Ferreri. Il cinema e i film, edited by S. Parigi, Marsilio, Venice 1995.*

The Marco Ferreri retrospective runs from 1 to 14 December at London's Ciné Lumière. See www.icilondonesteri.it for details.

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2. Dillinger is Dead
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