



## ENCHANTMENT / SPELLS / MASSACRES

European Media Art Festival, Osnabrück, Germany  
April 20-24, 2022

Clouds in an oversaturate Kodak blue sky — a handheld image, grungy frame lines, visible sprocket holes: evidence of 8mm and 16mm originals. Camera gate hair detritus like black lightning coordinates with thunder crashes. A storm is brewing. Boisterous winds, the image dark with pixelated noise. Title *L'Incanto* (“The Spell” or “Enchanted”) and a phrase from the over-familiar Nutcracker *Waltz of the Flowers*. Title and music abruptly disappear, and serious business starts.

How to make a connection between images and words when speakers are not shown and pictured subjects unrelated?

An exchange between an aggressive interrogator and a compliant young-voiced respondent rushing her replies “Si” to routine questions before they are out of the questioner’s mouth. “Are you willing to answer?” “Si” She wants it to stop. “Do you understand what you are being charged with?” “Si.” On screen the Cave of Sybil, a Greco-Roman archeological site. “Are these your statements?” “Si.” “Is it the truth?” “Si.” Without break we’re in a later stage of the interrogation. “There was also pajamas with blood on it. Pajamas and a pair of jeans.” Interviewee, now a suspect, pauses, repeats impassively: “Pajama. Bloodstained . . .” A rough ocean tide is breaking, and now a new voice is explaining Tarot cards to a querent. “The Tarot acts as a mirror, because it’s us who created it.” Do images act as mirror to words in this film?

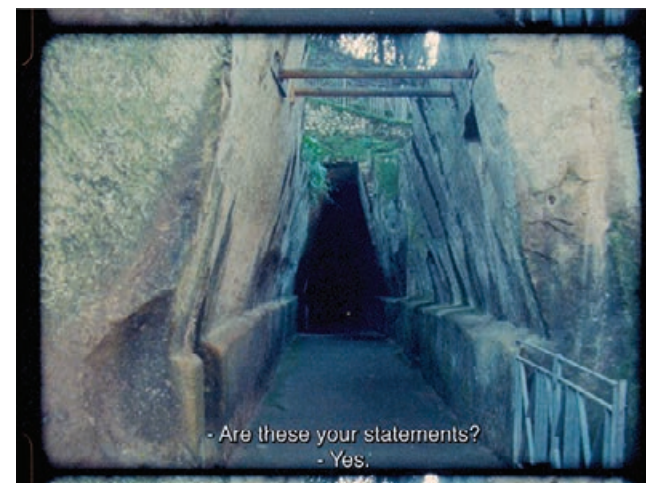
Chiara Caterina’s *L'Incanto* was one of the first films I saw at the European Media Arts Festival. I attempted to write about the festival for days, but news events clouded my focus. Soon after I was home from Osnabrück there were two major massacres. Separate unprovoked shootings by 18 year old boys armed with

military-grade weapons legally purchased. 19 children dead at an elementary school in Uvalde Texas, 10 black people, children to grandmothers, killed at a supermarket in Buffalo New York. Like many people, I was overcome with a confusion of emotions: sympathy, empathy, anger, disgust, fury. Sympathy for victims, empathy with parents, families, friends; anger that young men, barely out of childhood, were able to purchase weapons of war and that unprincipled politicians cynically prevent any but the most insignificant changes in gun laws; disgust at racist theories promoted on cable television and elsewhere, which an unbalanced teenager seized on as justification for horrific actions; fury that the other young man was executed on the spot rather than stopped with non-lethal methodology: his motivation for murdering children will never be understood or even investigated. All that can be gleaned is an over-generalized “mental illness.”

A colleague reminded me of the homily that bad things are always happening, that we have to find pathways to continue what we do. But to overlook, to shut out these particular unspeakably awful events in the country I’ve adopted as my home is not something I feel quite ready for. Obviously I’m not comparing events in Italy decades ago with current horrors in the US, an uncountable number of family members, friends, neighbors in deep mourning. But thinking about this one film in the festival was somehow calming. I am at least able to continue.

*L'Incanto* includes archival audio connected with two incidents of violence. In 2006, Rosa Bazzi and her husband stabbed four people to death including an infant because “I didn’t like the way he was screaming.” In 1997, Donatella Colasanti was

ALL IMAGES Chiara Caterina *L'Incanto* (2020),  
frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.



found alive in the trunk of a car after being raped and tortured and her companion killed. The film incorporates parts of storied journalist Enzo Biagi’s interview with Donatella.

Chiara Caterina placed these audio recordings, along with segments of a Tarot card session and some other voices — all on the subject of death — against footage from (her words) “abandoned projects [ . . . ] nothing has been shot and recorded for the purposes of this movie.” The images are dynamic, each shot an immediate, palpable connection with the eye of the cinematographer. Visual montages set in apposition to selected fragments of dialogue, not to illustrate events described but to comprehend them. I found myself reading the voices *into* the images, not *through* definable rhetorical devices like metaphor or illustration. With Donatella Colasanti’s “They had left with the intention of killing us . . .” a fraying flag flaps forlornly in a violent wind, its thumping flutter punctuating her almost expressionless articulation: when found she was badly injured, hardly alive. The oversized multi-fingered hand of a mechanical shovel hoists stones onto a boat, with Rosa Bazzi’s baby voice “we went out nice and quiet and we didn’t do anything.” The borders of the frame, clogged with grime, highlight Rosa’s evasions, building one on another like the pile of stones. The images function not as a window into a past reality, but as surfaces in tense balance with their pictured subjects. In philosopher Richard Wollheim’s evocative phrase, it is a paradigm case of *seeing as*— we see the screen *as* picturing — encompassing — the awful events recounted on the sound track. The film maps remembered events onto a present world of extreme tides, winds, menacing caves, yellow smoke.

I imagine Chiara and her editor inserting footage onto a time-line against the voices. They seek image-sound amalgams that affect them, as in due course they will affect a viewer. Chiara Caterina’s images are shaped by her responses— in her instinctive choices of framing, camera movement, composition, focus. I suppose her influences (direct or inherited) are such filmmakers as Stan Brakhage and Marie Menken.

*L'Incanto* balances materials drawn from two types of archives, one personal, one public. A film made in this way is like a piece of improvised music, in which thematic material is given, but its power is in what an inspired musician makes of it. Such a music speaks spontaneously to the listener, communicating the humanity and emotional state of the artist, not only without words but beyond the limits of language. Among multiple examples I think of John Coltrane’s joyful “Favorite Things,” Nina Simone’s wrenching “Nobody’s Fault but Mine” or her magnificent “Theme from Samson and Delilah.” Like improvisation in jazz, editing is the heart of creativity in cinema.

The last US assault weapons ban expired in 2004. The 18 years since have seen numerous mass shootings. Many of the victims would be alive if there were simple,





straightforward laws limiting gun ownership. I can't shake the idea that the Uvalde and the Buffalo teenage murderers were connected – at least one of the shooters inspired by the so-called 'Replacement Theory' belched out *sotto voce* on cable TV by the babyface ignoramus Tucker Carlson and his cohorts, including the former president, to their clientele, their querents. Words, fat with unfulfillable promises, prey on dissatisfactions and arouse resentments, but offer only the power of a loaded gun. The Texas murderer signalled his intentions, but was ignored like the children covering from the shooter in their classrooms calling 911 on their mobile phones.

I personally found some small relief from the nightmares of the Buffalo and Texas murders in thinking through the effect of *L'Incanto* and the methodology that created it, balancing personal visual emotions against audio texts available to all. Though, of course, nothing has changed. It's only that I am able to continue with my own work. Bad things are always happening; but we can't let them stop us.

*L'Incanto* shared some qualities with many films in the EMAF competition category. The preponderance of film originals most

likely reflects a selection committee preference, if not a criterion of acceptance. As in *L'Incanto* there are many Bolex camera tropes (light flares, end-of roll flashes, visible sprocket holes and splices, dirt specks, etc.) Though these accidental features are indications of analog filmstock, I found their ubiquity a bit tiresome. But not in *L'Incanto*: its enlargement of Super 8 and 16mm footage forced into an HD frame highlights a tension between the materiality of an image and its depicted subject.

At least half the 24 EMAF competition films incorporated archival materials, used differently in each case. If the Osnabrück programmers are on to something — as I suspect they are — together these works represent a current tendency in artists moving image. This review continues on line.

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Review continues online at:  
[www.millenniumfilmjournal.com/  
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