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Sentire l'aria (Feeling the air)

The project

The context

Shepherding has ancient roots in the Biella region - a centre of excellence for the textiles industry, set in very particular surroundings - closely linked to the wool industry which developed here in the second half of the 18th century. The figure of the "*bergé*" (*shepherd*) is respected, even outside of folklore: popular tradition ascribes shepherds with authority on the mountains and full sovereignty over a world of traditions and underlying customs that have survived the industrial revolution and are only today beginning to slip into demise. The shepherd is now seen as the incarnation of popular culture.

The shepherd's work means always being away from home: sleeping under the stars, adapting to bad weather and negotiating the rental of the pastures or the sale of a lamb, in addition to constantly caring for each head of the herd, intervening rapidly as problems occur in order to ensure that the animals are always healthy and well-fed. This constant wandering in search of good grass means that shepherds gain an ever-changing knowledge of places, people and situations through the seasons. Nomadic herds rise to the mountain pastures in the summer and occupy the sleeping fields of the plains in the winter around the edge of factories and the edges of *modern life*.

While the wool industry is today only marginal for the economy of the Biella region, in Piedmont - affected by urgent issues associated with the crisis of the textile industry between globalisation and re-conversion - the figure of the shepherd has become a symbol and example of a relationship with nature that should be rediscovered and modernised both from a point of view of promoting the area and an intelligent re-interpretation of the local environment and countryside as part of a new economic model.

"Sentire l'aria" (Feeling the air) is inspired by the specific background of Biella to investigate the secret of solitude in the heart of a teenager from a middle class background, who has chosen the shepherd's life and a future on a human scale in order to create an alternative and sustainable micro-economy.

Who is Andrea?

On a day like any other, towards the end of the winter, the orange tinted light of the sunset marks out Andrea's silhouette. He is resting on a large stick known as a *cana* (shepherd's crook); wearing a work-worn gilet, he whistles precise orders to the dogs at his heels. In the background behind him are the plains, peppered with factories and houses whose roofs blink silently in the distance. Around him graze nearly two hundred Biella sheep in a terrace surrounded by evergreens and blackthorn. The last rays of sunlight filter like pins falling through the fir trees, illuminating the young man's gaze: he is happy today.

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Andrea will turn 18 in 2010. He is a healthy, strong young man with delicate features and the innocent smile of someone facing life with confidence. The son of a surgeon and a teacher, he chose to become a shepherd, apprenticed to *Niculìn* - an icon among shepherds in Biella - leading the herd through woods and fields far away from the collective rites of youth. Among the animals, leaning against the trees, caressed by the wind and the solitude, Andrea has become an adult.

This could be the image at the beginning of a meditation on the relationship between man and nature; a reflection on modern-day progress - "progress" which is often erroneously mistaken for "wellbeing" - and the consequent loss of that arcane synchrony with the rhythms of nature which we are gradually losing. Andrea stubbornly seeks this relationship through his choice of lifestyle; while his work - hard work - has become beneficial for Andrea on a psycho-physical level. A difficult choice in a delicate period of his life, which has nonetheless helped formed his character and approach to life with confidence and self-security. A case of a search for identity which may be common to many adolescents today, although often latent or hidden behind the negligence of adults.

The call of nature has become a genuine vocation for Andrea, an uneasy, impulsive but very intelligent boy who dreams of a different future, away from the four walls of school and its excessively standardised educational models. Andrea has always had a passion for animals. His father has a small property with a horse, the ever-present goat and a Maremma sheepdog. The young man seemed to find an inner peace when looking after these animals and when he first came into contact with sheep, docile, malleable animals far more obedient than goats, the lightning fell. The almost mythical aura surrounding the life of a shepherd sparked ever increasing curiosity in Andrea, an interest which his parents understood. After some difficult family confrontations, they allowed him to make his own decision. Andrea left secondary school to become a shepherd: fully aware of the finality of his decision. Then along came the right occasion: in the spring of 2008 a well-known shepherd from Occhieppo Superiore, Nicola P., known as *Niculìn*, took him on as assistant in exchange for board and lodging. The sense of angst which Andrea felt between the walls of the school pushed him strongly in a direction that may seem like evasion, but which on closer examination reveals illumination and strong existential resonance. Now, the quality and quantity of "new" relations which Andrea has created (with his parents, with *Niculìn*, with the animals, with the "air"...) has led him towards serious responsibility and forward-planning: the flight of a boy towards the free man he dreamt of becoming.

Andrea lives the cycle of the seasons, with minimum impact on nature. He says he is happy, for now. He believes that this is the only way, living in the maternal womb of *healing* nature, that he can understand the words of his grandfather who declared he could "feel the air" in their long walks in the woods of the Valle Elvo shortly before his death.

The film and the photo book

Time and solitude, nature and silence, man and animals. This is not a description of the shepherd's life, but only an interpretation; no answers, only questions posed in images: has this modern, unaware Walden escaped from the human gathering or has he encountered his inner self? Is his life a declaration of marginality or the resolute gesture of someone taking charge of their own life?

A troupe composed of Manuele Ceconello (director and operator), Andrea Taglier (photographer) and Claudio Pidello (assistant), has followed Andrea and *Niculìn* for nearly two years, along the various routes followed by the herd all over the Biella area, documenting their life in the open air.

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Today Andrea speaks a fluent Piedmont dialect, and confidently oversees the more than two hundred sheep in his personal herd; Dora and Birba, his inseparable dogs, swiftly respond to his rapid orders. He is aware, enthusiastic and proactive. He always wears his indispensable working shoes, and while resting he leans on his crook just the way Niculin did, as all shepherds do. Andrea knows how to recognise the health of his animals; he helps the ewes in lambing, and cares for the lambs rejected by their mothers. He knows the difference between pity and necessity; he doesn't idolize animals; he also considers his work under as part of an economic plan. He bargains prices and supplies with expertise, selling the fruit of his mountain labours. He has gained the trust of Niculin. Above all, he has not disappointed his family. He is sure of himself: the herd was the right choice. Physical work is alternated with contemplation of nature, and the apparent peace of solitude. Time becomes a form of life, an occasion for Andrea to construct and reconcile his world. When he reached 18, Andrea left Niculin forever. Breaking off his own herd, he set off on his own path.

The essence of the air

One summer day we arranged to meet Andrea in a place I had never been to before. Shortly after our arrival, low clouds began to gather and swiftly covered pastures and rocks, bringing rain with them. When they passed, as silently as time itself, a brilliant shaft of sunlight broke through a gap.

As the troupe watched the spectacle in excitement, Andrea observed the climatic change with the air of an experienced spectator. That small daily event seemed to have been designed to put that small corner of the Biella landscape at the centre of the world, at least for those long moments. In that banal moment in a postage stamp sized area of land, everything was World, each drop of rain was Water, each little noise became Sound and the movement of the clouds re-invented the cycle of Day and Night. We recorded that fragment of time as if it were a whole lifetime – not so much the ambition of a concentrated eternity, but a precious example of continuity, one part representing the whole. The film director stepped out of his role as a potential story teller and became – more simply and more radically – just a man with a video camera. That moment of time that rolled out, both indifferent and irreversible, had to be caught in its indication of a universal truth: everything changes. Andrea, the grass, the sheep, the ferns, us. Watching an instant that passes and changes things – even if imperceptible – is like experiencing a catastrophic and creative event, aware of being the only witness of our own, individual perception of life going by.

Andrea reigns over himself when he stands squarely planted with his crook in the centre of his world, just as the size of a centuries-old beech tree bears witness that it was once only a sapling. This is such an obvious, empirical observation; however, if we observe ourselves as we observe the experiences the world constantly offers us, we will discover how each single moment contains a program of the infinite, and how that infinite remains un-discoverable by definition, yet familiar through our own desire.

Therefore, the film director needs to take time before considering a story. He must face his privileged yet ambivalent role in using a tool which can both record and alter time. A documentary film director faces the problem of an infinite world through a tool which allows him to capture that tiny yet paradigmatic portion, that minute cutting that contains the DNA of the whole organism. A documentary is a director's desire to capture life as it changes. Rather than representing reality, a documentary captures its expression.

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Observing Andrea's pilgrimage between mountains and plains, snowfall and sunlight, long silences and sudden noise has been an experience of great personal development for me as an author. Through the obstinate physicality of his presence alongside the herd in any geographical or psychological condition, Andrea taught me how we ourselves create the ground under our feet, the obstacles that we find and the shortcuts we seek through our own desires, our will to create a condition of *temporary* immortality.

As he watches his herd, Andrea's gaze has the range of a wide-angle lens and the focus of a telescopic camera. His working day has the slowness of a no longer optimisable method, far from the forced arbitrage of any kind of competition. As a natural documentarist, Andrea has no thesis to prove: he simply provides the proof of undeniable facts.

Cinema creates proof of the existence of reality: that of the author. The author himself is proof of an eternally changing and arbitrary reality. Each individual documents his own self, while squinting through narrowed eyes in an attempt to see a possible world.

In the end, the substance of *Sentire l'aria* is light-hearted, despite the slow exchange of wide landscapes and sequences... perhaps it is merely an ironic dream, as Andrea lies in the pastures enjoying the fresh air of youth.

Manuele Cecconello

Feeling the air, feeling the cinema

If a Bildungsroman ("formation novel") is a story where the protagonist is a young man who passes through a series of ritual stages before freeing himself from dependence on his family and becoming an active member of society, we can easily claim that *Sentire l'aria* (*Feeling the air*) is a film from the same genre. However, Manuele Cecconello's film is first and foremost a documentary, which follows the *real* story of Andrea through a crucial phase of his existence, from the ages of sixteen to eighteen. Furthermore, a Bildungsroman usually follows an integrative course, in the sense that through a series of formative experiences the protagonist comes to recognise the fundamental rules of the society in which he will live, and becomes aware of the need to adapt to these rules, integrating himself into the current system. *Sentire l'aria* on the other hand is an atypical Bildungsroman, whose conclusion is not integration into contemporary society but a convinced search for a different way of living.

The route which we took to follow and accompany Andrea started from the schoolroom, the place of education par excellence, where social rules and cultural attitudes are learnt. From there we switch immediately towards an unexpected and unusual destination: the life of mountain pastures, solitude and a career as a shepherd. In this sense, the abyssal passage from the prologue in front of a desk at school to the first episode on a snowy pasture already encompasses the entire narrative development of the film. Just like any good Bildungsroman, *Sentire l'aria* assigns a decisive role to the figure of the mentor, the old shepherd Niculin, who takes Andrea with him and initiates him into his new work and the peculiar nature of his lifestyle. Andrea's formation takes place therefore on two levels: firstly his separation from the "world down there" and learning to live in the world of shepherds *together* with Niculin; secondly, finding his own way of living as a shepherd *in his own way*, breaking free from the tutorship of his mentor.

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Time itself marks out the stages of the process: linear time expressed in months, days and years, as the features of an adult gradually appear on the smooth face of the adolescent, but also the cyclic time of nature, as the seasons pass and implacably mark the rhythm of the shepherds' work and their life with the herd. It is precisely the passing of time, in its linear and cyclical ambivalence, that forms the essential aesthetic substance of *Sentire l'aria*.

Andrea's initiation to life with the real herd – away from the symbolic herd of society – does not take place with clamorous dramatic rites, but through long periods of time, in a gradual and progressive approach to nature and a parsimonious and enigmatic reality that challenges the film to recognise its hidden secrets. Only a precise and patient eye, accompanied by an equally attentive ear, could understand how and why Andrea decided to leave the world where we are used to living and accept a different yet no less valid style of life...

Sentire l'aria is constructed around exactly this observation and listening. *Sentire l'aria* is not the type of film to be watched or listened to passively, letting yourself be led by the structure of the story, but is instead a file to be watched, listened and felt. The camera accompanies Andrea in his work, finding a discrete place at his side, and spectators are called to find a similar position of participation and decorous observation. The long takes – especially those of the moped and the caravan – make us feel the time and the breath of the rural world while the shots of the mountain fracture and create profoundly significant considerations on the apparently uniform universe of rural life, to the point of using a split screen – an image divided in two – to express the attempt at penetrating the secrets of the protagonist's character, which is most profoundly used in the last chapter of the film. The soundtrack is dominated by the noise and the bleating of the sheep in the foreground, representing the most immediate and emblematic expression of pastoral life; however, this sound of reality is gradually interspersed with musical elements which intuitively introduce the exploration of an interior, emotional, psychological dimension which will be clarified and completed by Andrea's words – words which are always received not only in their semantic contents, but also in their auditory significance. In fact, it is reality itself, with its material nature, images and sounds which ultimately develops the Bildungsroman. Andrea has taught himself to feel the air, and we can follow him by learning to feel the film.

Enrico Terrone

