The night of the shooting stars

Director: Paolo and Vittorio Taviani
Country: Italy
Date: 1981

An overview of the work of the Taviani brothers by Terrence Rafferty of *The New York Times*:

BEFORE the Coens, the Hugheses, the Quays, the Wachowskis and the Farrellys, there were the Tavianis, Paolo (born in 1931) and Vittorio (born in 1929): the greatest cinematic brother act since Louis and Auguste Lumière, who pretty much invented the movies just over a century ago. And when the Tavianis are at their best -- in pictures like "Padre Padrone" (1977), "The Night of the Shooting Stars" (1982), "Kaos" (1984) and "Elective Affinities" (1996) -- they seem very much like the Lumières: the images and sounds they capture are so strange, so fresh and so unaccountably beautiful that you can almost believe that they, too, were present at the creation.

This is a fanciful notion, of course, but the Tavianis' films tend to stimulate the remoter stretches of the imagination. That's where their art flourishes -- in the wild outbacks of history, where the air is charged with myth, folklore and fairy tale. It's a hard place to get to, and, as MOMA's coming retrospective of the brothers' work demonstrates, the Tavianis themselves took a while to find their way.

Although they began making feature films in 1962, their movies didn't make much of an impression on international audiences until nearly a decade later. The Italian cinema was bursting with new talent in the late 50's and early 60's. Among the directors who made their debuts between 1958 and 1965 were Pier Paolo Pasolini, Francesco Rosi, Ermanno Olmi, Marco Bellocchio, Gillo Pontecorvo and a young prodigy named Bernardo Bertolucci. In that company the Tavianis' first efforts could only have looked ordinary.

But in 1971 they did their first literary adaptation, uprooting a Tolstoy story and replanting it in their native land, and began to develop their own unmistakable style. "St. Michael Had a Rooster" is a fairly insufferable picture -- its hero, a mad late-19th-century radical clinging obstinately to his revolutionary ideas, comes off as a narcissistic bore -- but it's partly redeemed by the boldness and blunt elegance of its visual ideas. The strongest sequence, a botched guerrilla raid filmed in precisely choreographed long shots, is an early indication of the Tavianis' distinctive approach to violence. Human conflict, seen from the unnerving distance at which they place their camera, becomes a kind of tragic slapstick: stirring, messy, laughably awful.

Their next film, "Allonsanfan" (1974), picked up the rich, unstable tone of that sequence and ran with it -- ran amok, I'm tempted to say. "Allonsanfan," which is set in Italy just after the Napoleonic wars, is so rife with invention that it's barely coherent, but it's a much sprightlier take on political drama than the often lugubrious "St. Michael." The hero, Fulvio (Marcello Mastroianni), is a leader of a ragtag revolutionary cult that calls itself the Sublime Brotherhood, and, like most of the Tavianis' protagonists, he suffers from a divided conscience. He can't quite make up his mind whether he wants to be a freedom fighter or a pampered aristocrat. It's a tough choice, because both his highborn family and the high-minded Sublime Brothers are deeply ridiculous -- a point driven home by the berserk musical numbers the Tavianis stage for each group. "Allonsanfan" turns politics into farce, a comic orgy of misapprehensions and betrayals that ends, inevitably, in the hero's betrayal of himself and a death that hinges on nothing more significant than a stupid mistake.

Erratic as these transitional films are, they are evidence of the filmmakers' originality and independent-mindedness: although the Tavianis are unambiguously "men of the left" (as the Europeans say), they are bracingly unsentimental about revolution and those who espouse it. And their next picture, "Padre Padrone," showed an equally heartening disinclination to romanticize peasants; the intellectually and

morally stunted Sardinian shepherds of that film are no one's idea of the salt of the earth. "Padre Padrone," adapted from the autobiography of the linguist Gavino Ledda, was the Tavianis' artistic breakthrough, the film in which all the audacious, sometimes half-baked experiments of their previous movies triumphantly paid off.

It's a film about the harshness of nature -- including human nature, which is terrifyingly incarnated by Gavino's brutal, crafty father -- and the killing loneliness of rural life. Gavino, pulled out of school at the age of 5 and then roughly indoctrinated in the solitary discipline of sheepherding, is about as alienated a character as the movies have to offer: he's by no means at one with nature (which is probably just as well, considering the blasted, unforgiving terrain that surrounds him), and he seems a total stranger to himself. But the Tavianis let us know, through a variety of brilliantly imaginative aural devices, that although young Gavino is illiterate, he's unusually sensitive to the sounds of the world around him -- as alert, in his way, as a good herding dog. And when he finally gets the chance to educate himself, he's tenacious; the solitude of study doesn't bother him a bit. Watching -- and listening to -- "Padre Padrone," you learn to respect the intractable weirdness of nature, and then to wonder at the power of language to make sense of it.

"The Night of the Shooting Stars" is an almost inconceivably full movie experience, impossible to summarize neatly. The style is as antic and daring as that of "Padre Padrone," but it's far more lyrical, revealing unanticipated beauties everywhere, even amid the horrors of war. At several points the movie invokes Homer, and -- especially in its climactic sequence, a tragicomic battle in a wheat field between the fleeing villagers and a band of Fascists -- it actually seems worthy of the comparison. Fittingly, "The Night of the Shooting Stars" opens the retrospective at the Modern; it's the Tavianis' masterpiece.

In "Kaos," they again attempted to tap the power of local myth, this time in the form of four Sicilian stories that feel like folk tales but are in fact the creations of the very modern writer Luigi Pirandello. Although the tales are graceful and satisfying, the movie's most extraordinary sequence is its epilogue, in which Pirandello returns to his hometown in Sicily after a long absence and meets the ghost of his mother. She tells him a story about her own childhood. Her story is less shapely and more mysterious than the ones he has been telling us, and it ends, not with a tidy resolution, but with the sort of transcendent image that bursts the boundaries of narrative form: a group of children tumbling down slopes of volcanic ash into a heaven-blue sea. This is one of the few images in movies that deserve to be called sublime; it's like a newly minted Homeric epithet.

Pirandello's mother tells him that he should "learn to see things with the eyes of those who see them no more," and the brothers Taviani appear to have taken that advice to heart. Their films are almost exclusively historical, and they always seem to be searching for a perspective that can accommodate older, perhaps forgotten ways of seeing the world. That's clearly the impulse behind "Good Morning, Babylon" (1987), their only English-language film, which looks at the making of D. W. Griffith's "Intolerance" through the eyes of two immigrants, brothers from a family that restores cathedrals in Italy. Unfortunately, the movie doesn't get far past its lovely conceit: it's never more than an idea for a movie, and stubbornly refuses to come to life. […]

The Taviani brothers' 16 feature films represent one of the most diverse and consistently stimulating bodies of work in postwar cinema. As I watched these movies, one after the other, I found myself nearly as impressed by the failures as by the successes, because I couldn't help marveling at the filmmakers' willingness to fail, their ability to keep striking out for new territory and then to return home, even after a defeat, with undiminished spirits. For 40 years, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani have remained faithful to a simple but demanding revolutionary ideal: good or bad, the movies always speak to us of liberty, equality -- and, yes, fraternity.

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