



London Epic: Compulsory Environment

A conversation with Enrico Masi
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by Daniele Croci

ENRICO MASI (1983) is an Italian filmmaker and anthropologist who founded the film production company *Caucaso* in 2004, and who started his directing career in 2006 with the long-term project *Shooting Postmoderno*, a film essay based on phenomenological studies. *La situation est Claire* (2007) is his first experiment, a 22-minute short movie shot in France. Since 2008, he has worked as a filmmaker at the University of Bologna, where in 2011 he was awarded a research grant supporting scientific projects and visual anthropology for Laboratorio Mela – <www.mela.scedu.unibo.it>. His subsequent works have been widely acclaimed, as *Khalid* (2009), which was part of the Official selection at the Cannes International Festival du Film Panafrican, or *Giussano* (2010), a research on the Italian Northern League, which was awarded the Best Documentary Film Under 30 at Reggio Emilia. His film on the London regeneration process triggered by the last Olympic Games, *The Golden Temple* (2012), was premièred at the Giornate degli Autori – Venice Film Festival in 2012, and has been screened during the fourth edition of Docucity, a yearly documentary film festival held at the University of Milan.



D. Croci: *The Golden Temple* is obviously linked to a specific historical and geographical event, i.e. the regeneration process associated with the 2012 London Olympic Games; it is also clear that your main focus revolves around the personal experiences of the people you have interviewed, like Mike Wells, who has been defined the protagonist of the film. What was the starting point, the city or its dwellers? More specifically, how and when was the idea of *The Golden Temple* conceived?

E. Masi: the idea of a film *à faire* in London represented the essential attempt at understanding, entering a new terrain of my life experience and a landscape where to develop my research path. Together with the anthropologist Alessandra Maisani, who had the opportunity to work on similar topics in Brazil, we visited the area around Westfield in Stratford, few days after the mall opening, in September 2011. That specific cruise was the first step of what we later started to call *Perimetrations*. The city is made by its dwellers, therefore what I recognized since the beginning was a coherent organism, and there was an unseen story beneath the surface, the tough “skin” of the urban space.

D. Croci in your film, you introduce a remarkable contribution by Iain Sinclair, an author who has been particularly interested in the process of regeneration in London. When did you first know or meet him? Would you like to spend a few words about your collaboration?

E. Masi: *The Golden Temple* is a project built upon several exceptional meetings. In my opinion movies are always created by remarkable meetings. At that time, a friend of mine was living in Kingsland Road, Dalston. She suggested me to read some work of this particular author: his books were already on my shelf as a text to discover. Our first meeting was important to develop the original gaze on the matter. This meeting with Iain Sinclair took place in October 2011. First of all, I asked him about the inclusion of short extract from his book *Ghost Milk* in the film, in order to create a sort of literary bridge, a caption as a narrative frame used in silent movies during the 20's. Then we had an interview in his house in January 2012, recorded in photographs by Giuliana Fantoni. In particular, I remember a Thai or Asiatic mask laying aside upon a mountain of books in his studio. To be honest I had the idea to transpose that mask into an icon and create a subnarrative stream, expanding the film towards other stories, stressing other and different memories. The topic of the film was vast and we talked about Baghdad, Global Branding opera, lost future and old Victorian baths. He was involved in the making of the film *Swandown* as well, together with Andrew Kötting.



I saw that film later, on a special screening at the Hackney Film Festival, the 8th of September 2012, the same day of the closing ceremony of the games, in Hackney Wick just off the Olympic Stadium while Coldplay were playing at the opposite side of the canal.

D. Croci: how did you and your crew proceed during the shooting? Did you make a significant amount of planning or did you prefer a more spontaneous, almost psycho-geographical approach?

E. Masi: I would not use here the psycho-geographic concept to explain my approach, because the preparation was organized all along the long term research in which I have been involved since 2006 entitled *Shooting Postmoderno*. Coincidentally, the *Shooting Postmoderno* approach had his origin in London, precisely in Newington Green, Hackney. This research represents the effort of narrating few issues connected to our contemporary age, that I consider crucial. Urbanism as an organic (and inorganic) process of development, cultural clashes within traditional languages and new social environment, using languages and environment in the broader meaning.

D. Croci: in *The Golden Temple* you have made the valuable effort to take into account and to represent different perspectives and opinions on urban regeneration. How does such intentionally well-rounded approach relate with the strong authorial and artistic stance you have chosen for your film? In other words, to what extent do you think your gaze – as author, as intellectual – has re-moulded and influenced the raw material you have encountered?

E. Masi: there was a big effort to keep a well balanced attitude and respect all the opinions expressed throughout the film. We collected 40 hours of footage, during a solid shooting period of 6 months. Together with the editor and few supervisors from *Caucaso*, *Paris Dupleix* and *University of Bologna* we were aware that those opinions, particularly the ones expressed at length by some among the interviewed people in the film, could be dangerous for the cinematic and entertaining result of the film. But we made a precise decision, and we tried to respect the pace of every single contribution, even in his controversial nature.



D. Croci: Would you define your perspective as political, and *The Golden Temple* as a political film? Do you feel that an idea of *commitment* with the city and its inhabitants is implied in your gaze on the London Olympics?

E. Masi: I must refer to the essay *Why I write* (1946) where George Orwell writes: "The opinion that Art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude." The entire corpus of my work during the last ten years is directly or indirectly related to political issues, to unveil and show an imagery that is uncovered by national broadcasting programs. Coincidences and combinations growing and exchanging influences across the landscape of our lives. Recently I started a personal, symbolic migration towards more intimate issues. I am not tied to the use of certain terms such as *microstories*. In my opinion, the *grande histoire* is powerfully represented in his universal flavour by human beings and their extraordinary adventure in life. It is a sort of passage from landscape painting to portrait.

D. Croci: what is your role of cultural operator and non-fiction filmmaker in our crisis-ridden (not only as regards the economy) western society? What is your relationship, as a director but also as academic researcher, with the film industry, the chronic lack of funds and the major institutions which promote cultural studies, like for instance universities and research centres?

E. Masi: I am not worried about lacking funds. It is our duty to find a way to express contents and to promote the spread of civil rights using Cinema as our medium. After a period spent abroad, coming back to Italy sounds like a new adventure, and there is more to do here than elsewhere. As an author I feel that narrative and epic way of transmission of stories and memories constitute a tool of action. It is a constant cultural operation.

D. Croci: do you reckon that gender, class and/or age differences determine to some extent a definite attitude towards the Olympics' refurbishing? Have such differences been relevant in the answers you got from the people you interviewed?

E. Masi: I have always felt London as a raw, heavy environment. The sentence that always comes back to my mind, in this respect, is "Next please". And it may be the title of a chapter that I will write soon, connected to power and relations. Canetti broadly wrote about this matter. In my opinion this habitat is masculine in a sense of vertical hierarchy and I imagine this metaphor sounds phallic for someone. Talking about class differences I have noticed a decisive division between the historic heart of Stratford (that is predominantly working class) and the new East End-based artistic community. The working class public opinion was generally divided in two main orientations: 1) a



vague nostalgic feeling based on: disappearing of old, sacred Pubs, alteration of public spaces, a general rise of the prices; 2) a positive sense of hope towards the future. The point of view of the artistic community is more interesting. We must consider that in the area of Hackney the presence of the artistic community is particularly relevant (and it reveals similarities with Williamsburg, the NY equivalent in Brooklyn). I have noticed a general distance and the widespread idea that Sport was not highbrow enough to represent a theme or an interesting topic to analyse. It was the polar opposite for us. I would synthesize with this phrase that Mike said on his boat during the filming: "*Sport is war minus death*".

D. Croci: In your film, you have stressed the contradiction between the people who are bound to lose their house or their job, and the ads which pledge vacancies and greener Olympics. I would argue that there can also be recognised an intrinsically dialectical nature of the Olympics and the surrounding regeneration process. On the one hand, they can both be regarded as a highly symbolic and metaphorical event, almost ethereal in its ideological inconsistency; on the other hand, it is pretty clear that they bring extreme and violent material consequences in the real, mundane world. The warfare is twofold, waged simultaneously through the ideology of a golden temple of capitalism and consumerism, but also through bulldozers or municipality orders to close a long-established family business. Do you agree with such tentative and non-exhaustive interpretation? Which side do you perceive as the most threatening, the material base or the ideological superstructure – to borrow inappropriately two dusty, ancient terms? With hindsight, now that many months have passed, which process has been causing the most devastating consequences?

E. Masi: today the Olympics Games and most of the main global sport events are terrain of protest. Reconsidering these occasions as parenthesis in space and time help us to connect the research with the whole idea of non-places developed by Augè and Harvey. In these days there are revolts in Brazil, that will be the main field of tension for the next three years. There is an ongoing pivotal change in the world. Grand Events are claiming to be the future, using dangerous concepts such as Sustainability, versus an international movement representing the fundamental base. This clash is impressive and its increasing. Brazil will be the turning point.



D. Croci: your original filmic and academic perspective upon the urban area of London has proven particularly effective thanks to your gaze of “stranger”, a hybrid, in-between figure who has the privileged opportunity to see the city with different eyes. What is your opinion – as an Italian citizen who has spent a lot of time abroad – about the process of regeneration the whole metropolitan area of Milan is undergoing for the 2015 World Exposition? Do you think that parallels can be drawn between Milan and London?

E. Masi: certainly Milan and London are not comparable in economical weight, but we can use a special proportional mind scheme and say that this Expo experience reminds us of something antique and *exotique* like Paris, Torino, Chicago and so on. Ideally Milan should have all its sociologists, poets and filmmakers, and also musicians, architects and all sorts of humanity interested in the value of the city as an organic adventure, all of them taking part in the debate. This should be performed in a film.

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