

Ephemeral Architectures, Colossal Sets: the *Intolerance* of the Taviani Brothers and Identity Recovered

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Architecture and cinema maintain a close creative relationship. Indeed, set construction and staging decisions can reveal a great deal about the process of making a film. In this process, architectural language provides certain theoretical keys and tools that can help us to observe how films are shaped through their different stages. A reflection on the evolution of sets from the first experimental filmmaking pioneers through to the first decades of 20th century may therefore shed some light on the varied range of expressive and technical resources that propelled the early development of cinema.

Among its many facets, architecture has given rise to a field in which the ephemeral is the main parameter. This ephemerality is related not only to its temporal duration, but also to the idea of transformation, adaptation or multiplicity of interpretations and applications (MOLINAS-SILES, GARCÍA and TORRES, 2013). For the current analysis, we will delimit the idea of *ephemeral* as follows: certain sets have gone down in history thanks to their extraordinary visual power, and this monumental quality has prevented them from being used again in other productions. In other words, their effect was so great that it proved almost impossible to shoot another film with them without evoking the film in which they originally appeared. For this reason, their reuse, except partially, was not possible.

If there is any single emblematic example of this category, it is *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916), whose amazing depiction of the Babylonian period culminates with the colossal set of the walled courtyard. Griffith's film will thus be useful to break down the components of the architectural set referred to above, its particular features and its evolution. Following this analysis, we will assess cinema's potential for redefining the codes of that fiction set. To this end we will refer to the set for the film *Good Morning, Babylon* (Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 1987) to explore how the intervention of its protagonists, two artists from Tuscany who emigrate to United States, re-conceives the Babylonian construction in Griffith's film.

Based on an analysis of both films, we will observe the characteristics of two opposing architectural models. In the first, in general terms, the instrumentalist view of the set underpins its lush and monumental features. In the remake by the Tavianis, on the other hand, the parameter to be considered is the search for a unique identity and the desire to inscribe it into the set. In this way, the two films share a connection that may serve our purposes here to show how the magnitude of an ephemeral architecture can be redefined so that its main objective becomes maintaining the roots of its creators stable over time. This is, in short, the basis of our analysis here of the transformation of a set and its creative possibilities.

Intolerance, Babylon: The construction of a film set

His good fortune with critics, whose views are always partial and questionable, has turned the filmmaker D. W. Griffith into the "father of modern cinema".¹ Blind acceptance of this label would give rise to more than one objection from the different traditions in film studies engaged in unravelling the origins of the language and narrative forms of cinema. Nevertheless, a consideration of this arguable achievement—i.e. that Griffith laid the foundations of the golden age of classic cinema—will help us to sketch a portrait of the film that is our object of study here, *Intolerance*. In 1916, Griffith had a solid reputation as a filmmaker thanks to the success of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which ensured him a bigger budget for his next project. With a plot constructed around four separate time periods, from the Passion of Christ to the contemporary United States, *Intolerance* is a triumph of staging at the service of narration, with four stories that explore, up to the film's climax, the evolution of the human condition over the course of history. Faced with such creative ambition, it is hardly surprising that the spectator's gaze should be captivated by the colossal nature of the scenes set during the fall of Babylon. The set for this part of the

film thus offers an emblematic example of the technical evolution of cinema and, at the same time, a unique specimen of ephemeral film architecture.

In his study of the film set, Jean-Pierre Berthome explains how, during the early years of the 20th century, people began to understand that this element had the capacity to seduce the audience and to establish its supremacy over the theatre. The first creative developments were aimed at "a series of historical reconstructions that used antiquity as a pretext for satisfying the audience's taste for violence and eroticism" (2003:35). Notable among these first films is the Italian film *Cabiria* (1914) by Giovanni Pastrone, which, as Berthome suggests, boasted a set that "would invent an exotic realism whose main purpose would be to provoke astonishment" (2003:36). It was probably this astonishment, along with his competitive nature, that seduced D.W. Griffith when he saw *Cabiria*, as it was this film that gave him the definitive push to make *Intolerance*. Pastrone's film, with its monumental, three-dimensional sets with their extraordinary dramatic presence, may have been the inspiration that the US filmmaker needed to give his already ambitious work a truly revolutionary dimension. Griffith thus bought a copy of the Italian film to study it and attempt to move several steps beyond its visual impact.

The creation of the Babylonian set for *Intolerance*, the pinnacle of Griffith's creative work, is without doubt one of the most fascinating stories of this period of film history. According to the explanation offered by Santiago Vila, Griffith created a scrapbook of a series of aesthetic models that served as a guide for the development of the set (1997: 211). At this point, it is worth recalling an idea related to the evolution of cinema expounded by Berthome: every set has a purpose. Indeed, it is significant that such an exhaustive search for models and details should result in a film which, nevertheless, "values spectacular effect over historical accuracy" (2003: 38). Consequences of this creative criterion are, for example, the constant ornamental overload, the useless gigantism of columns designed exclusively to support the voluminous figures of elephants, which bear witness to Griffith's ultimate objective. It is for this reason that, as Javier Marzal points out, the essence of Griffith's films can be found in 19th century melodrama, in which the aesthetic presence of the set already played an important role (1998: 51).

As suggested above, the Babylonian courtyard in *Intolerance* has diverse origins. Berthome notes the Indian ancestry of the columns and the elephants, and the attention to detail typical of Mesopotamian art; Juan Antonio Ramírez, meanwhile, points out the John Martin painting *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821).² How can Mesopotamian art and an English Romantic painter coexist



John Martin's painting *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821) as one of the possible basis for the sets of *Intolerance: Love's Struggle throughout the Ages*, David Wark Griffith, (1916)

in the same scene? This is precisely one of the most interesting aspects of Griffith's film. Instead of constructing a historical guide, the filmmaker seeks a resource to amplify the monumental and dramatic dimensions of the story he is telling. In this respect, an extremely relevant reflection is offered by Vila, who points out that Martin's painting and indeed most of Griffith's references date back to before the first archaeological excavations, in 1848, in the ancient Mesopotamia (1997: 213). Griffith's ambition is thus not to be found in fidelity but in recreation. This fact points to another quality of the set of *Intolerance*: its transitory nature.

The hallmark of this period of cinema was its constant evolution, whereby numerous filmmakers embarked on a great race to see who could win the prize. As noted above, *Intolerance* was largely a reaction to the huge success of *Cabiria*. And this reaction was so strong that Griffith spared no expense in his construction of a set close to fifty metres long, forty metres tall, and thirty metres deep (2003: 38). As a consequence of this feat, filmmakers were keen to find a new set that could outdo Griffith's. Thus, in 1922 Allan Dwan directed a version of *Robin Hood* that sought to rival the magnificence of Griffith's film. To do this, he hired the son of the architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a 12th century castle and fortress where the action would take place. The result, although far from brilliant and, of course, less remembered than the Babylonian courtyard, clearly reveals the huge impact on the budding film industry of this way of understanding the function of the set.

Having thus briefly reviewed the origin of *Intolerance*, we can affirm the connection between its dramatic functionality and its ephemeral nature, as its colossal nature and visual power were so personal that it was almost impossible to reuse it in other films. These sets

were so unique, representing themselves with such a specific purpose and meaning, that it was quite unimaginable that they should appear in any other film. And this is also the reason behind the great race embarked upon in the film industry to maximise the impact of each subsequent production, a quest still considered to be the stylistic aim of much commercial cinema today. Nevertheless, the definition of the set of *Intolerance*, so colossal and at the same time ephemeral, poses a challenge of similar dimensions: is it possible to inscribe on this kind of architecture a meaning and an identity that can remain stable over time? The vision offered by the Italian film-makers Paolo and Vittorio Taviani in *Good Morning, Babylon* will help us to shed light on this question.

Good Morning, Babylon: The set and identity recovered

Along with filmmakers like Francesco Rosi, Elio Petri or Ermanno Olmi, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani exemplify a generation in which Italian cinema became fully aware of its political dimension. After an adolescence marked by the outbreak of World War II and their membership in the Communist Party, the Tavianis found in neorealism a style through which they could develop their own aesthetic.³ The Tuscan filmmakers thus based their work on themes as familiar as work, ideology and cultural roots: the home, identity, the home landscape. This brief preamble will aid in the interpretation of the interests of the two filmmakers that lay behind a film like *Good Morning, Babylon*. Set in their home province of Tuscany, the film begins with the ups and downs of two brothers forced to find a new living after the construction workshop run by their father closes down. Their dream of prospering in the building profession will lead them to United States where, finally, they will join the team of artists who designed the sets for D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*.

It is not often that a fiction film draws on the historical details of a previous production. *Good Morning, Babylon* is notable precisely for its scenes focusing on the creation of the Babylonian set for *Intolerance*. An analysis of this creative process of the Tavianis offers a chance to observe how the lavish set in Griffith's film is reused, redefined and transformed from an ephemeral architectural backdrop for which time plays a leading role, into a work of art for which the fundamental parameter is the identity of its creators. As noted above, the constituent elements of the Tavianis' films are work and the importance of cultural roots. In the first case, work defines a way of living, a set of customs and traditions that illuminate the

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landscape in which their works take place. However, it is the second point that takes on particular significance. As Hilario J. Rodríguez suggests, "their films, rather than reproducing specific scenes, denote a particular way of observing things [...] which they have inherited from

the great Tuscan masters. Their pictorial references are thus always indirect" (2007: 36).

As native Tuscans, the Tavianis bring in the atmosphere of their roots into each of their films.

Thus, the church, whose restoration concludes the first scenes of *Good Morning, Babylon* reflects the Romanesque style of the cathedral of San Miniato in Pisa, birthplace of the filmmakers. The influence of the landscapes of their childhood is so strong that this same building will appear in films as diverse as *Padre Padrone* (1977) and *The Elective Affinities*

The elephant as a cornerstone in the life journey of the Taviani brothers



(*Le affinità elettive*, 1996), as a sign of the attachment felt by both filmmakers for their homeland. Although its dramatic importance is minimal, the church indicates a region, acting as an almost sentimental marker of the territory in which they move. This special way of observing things will thus give a different function and value to the elements of the set of *Intolerance*, which will ultimately lose their monumental quality to hint at other aspects.

In the previous section we pointed out Griffith's aesthetic debt in his creation of the Babylonian set, a gigantic multi-referential Meccano constructed to maximise its visual power. In fact, one of its borrowings is its appropriation of the elephants from *Cabiria*, also in this case ornamental components designed to enhance the monumental nature of the Babylonian courtyard. However, for *Good Morning, Babylon*, the Tavianis decided to modify the function of this decorative element to vest it with a value of its own. Thus, the elephant becomes a piece that communicates each step of the two brothers on their life's journey. In the beginning, the Tavianis introduce their characters while they are giving the final touches to an elephant-shaped relief that dominates the centre of the restored church. Later on, another elephant, this one made of papier-mâché, will introduce the brothers into the production of *Intolerance*. Finally, the protagonists will persuade Griffith to create the majestic elephants that will form part of the columns of the set. The key to this figure, as noted by Rodríguez (2007: 129) in his study, is the role conferred by the Tavianis upon the elephant, as a bearer of a memory of a heritage and a place. Even while the familiar image of Tuscany ends up devoured by the stages of Hollywood, the two filmmakers reinforce the feeling of origin and identity in each stage of their characters' adventure.

More than a mere recreation, *Good Morning, Babylon* seeks to reinterpret the key elements of Griffith's Babylonian set. For the Tavianis, this film is a story about work, and it thus no accident that it should reflect the point of view of its creators, to the point of negating in its scenes any spectacular view of the Babylonian courtyard. If we define the significance of *Intolerance* according to instrumentalist parameters, i.e., as the sum of multiple sources whose ultimate objective is to underline the magnificence of the set, in the Tavianis' film we find the set itself linked to the cultural and emotional tradition of its builders. Hence the interest of the two filmmakers in showing how the intervention of their protagonists subsequently determines the significance of the set. While in the original film Griffith put together an extraordinary backdrop based on a clash of visual sources, the Tavianis choose to lower the scale and dimensions of the set, to reduce its ornamental components and focus the power of the ensemble on the decisive participation of the Bonnano brothers. While Griffith invoked the sign of the

ephemeral, of the grouping of details aimed at achieving an effect and, as in other many productions, doomed to disappear reconverted in reusable blocks, the Tavianis evoke a solid, coherent identity that resists the passage of time and invites us to think of it as the restoration of a building, like the church in the opening scene, rather than the creation of a film set.

For the Tavianis, history has a seminal influence on our personal evolution and accompanies us wherever we go, because it is part of us. It is thus not surprising that their view of Hollywood should turn, against all predictions, to identifying the trace of family in the creation of artefacts associated more with the capitalist culture, destined to disappear after their mass consumption. This is the reason why *Good Morning, Babylon* should be understood as a vindication of artistic and emotional identity, the basis of which will affect the vision it offers of *Intolerance*. If, as we noted above, the origins of the Babylonian set are found in the cuttings pasted together by Griffith during the development of the film (it is important to remember that at this time Hollywood did not yet recognize the importance of the director's film crew), in the Italian film it will be the two craftsmen who inscribe their own image on the monumental set, to blur its ephemeral lines in search of a memory in the transitory, an identity recovered.

Redefinition of the film set

The purpose of the analysis conducted in the two previous sections has been to show the two opposed creative personalities that underpin the films *Intolerance* and *Good Morning, Babylon*. While in Griffith's film the significance of the set lies in its monumental dimensions, in the Tavianis' film its meaning is expressed in a tireless search for its artistic roots. In this section we will examine the images of the Italian film to explore the nature of

this transformation, which redefines the significance of the film set of the Babylonian courtyard.

Our starting point will be to examine how the set is seen—and filmed—in each film. As Santiago Vila points out, in *Intolerance* priority is given to “the movement of the point of view—or vanishing point—in and between perspective compositions, in order to give ubiquity to the *prince's view* [...] from which the arrangement of the different scenes acquires a narrative meaning” (1997: 213). This panoptic view, i.e., where the whole inside can be seen from a single point, is similar to the view used by John Martin in his painting *Belshazzar's Feast*. On the other hand, the Tavianis establish their own way of seeing as soon as the film begins. The story starts with the restoration of the façade of a Tuscan church. As they are about to finish the job, the Bonnano patriarch asks for a chair to sit and look at the result of the work. Facing the front of the cathedral, the father says: “I am sure that after building it they looked at it from here.” In opposition to the omniscient point of view employed by Griffith, where the image asserts the colossal nature of his creation, is the modest place reserved by the Tavianis for the craftsman, the master who observes at ground level, satisfied with the end of his work.

From this perspective, the Tavianis alter the scale of the set completely. To begin with, the scenes show small portions of it, from the stairway up to the door leading into the courtyard. The Italian filmmakers contextualise these views in quiet moments, lacking any monumental dimensions. Thus, we only observe fragments of the set during some of break from shooting or in the scene of the protagonists' wedding banquet. In this way, the camera and the layout adapt the elements of the set to a modest, almost tiny scale, so much so that the effect produced on the spectator in watching the original images in the premiere of *Intolerance* is highly significant of the pur-

Small portions of Griffith's colossal set in *Good Morning, Babylon* (Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 1987)



pose given by the filmmakers to the set. What matters to the Tavianis is the work done to build it and not the final result. Thus, the focus is on inscribing the identity of their characters on the Babylonian courtyard rather than exalting its colossal dimensions. In this way, the set punctuates the qualities of its creators.

Charles and Mirella Affron (1995) propose a series of characteristics depending on the kind of set being analysed. In the case of *Intolerance*, the characteristic would be of set as decoration, given that it is a colossal construction whose effect relies on the imitation of other art forms and whose features take on a greater importance through its decorative qualities. In contrast, in the case of the set of *Good Morning, Babylon*, the only architectural element given heightened significance is the elephant,

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which plays the role of thematic link to the family memory of the film's protagonists. This individual feature, along with the Tavianis' organisation of space, holds the meaning of the set. While in the first case that meaning is decorative, in the second we cannot even assign it a particular category. Strictly speaking,

the film never shows us the final result, except in the archive footage of the original movie, all of which suggests that the primary intention of the filmmakers is to highlight the people who created it, not their creation.

The early period of cinema was not notable for its recognition of the work of the technical crew involved in the productions. In fact, Vila explains (1997: 211) that it was not until 1973 that the artistic director Walter Hall, along with the carpenter Huck Wortman, was revealed as the man behind the design of the wall. This information contrasts with the tone given by the Tavianis to their recreation of the film, in which, even during the premiere, the Bonnano brothers are unequivocally identified as the creators of the magnificent set for Griffith's film. Once again, we must keep in mind the underlying theme of the film: the story is told from the perspective of its creators, out of whose hands the true grandeur is born.

From this point of view, it seems clear that the set of *Intolerance* undergoes a redefinition in the hands of Paolo and Vittorio Taviani. In the first section of this article we highlighted the value of the ephemeral that the set brought into play; namely, that it is so unique that it represents itself with a particular purpose and meaning, making it impossible to imagine it as part of another film. Even in the archive images that appear in *Good Morning, Babylon*, the Babylonian courtyard displays an enormity that is all but impossible to associate with a

new production, built exclusively in exaltation of Griffith's artistic greatness. Against this ambition the Tavianis oppose the know-how of the designers, revealed in the patient work and the pieces which, from one scene to the next, we see scattered around the film location. In other words, theirs is a dream to be inscribed in a tradition and an identity obscured by the practical purpose of the set. *Good Morning, Babylon* redefines the meaning of *Intolerance* because the whole film, from its script to its staging, is explained from the perspective of its workers. Thus, although the shooting takes up only a small part of the film, the Tavianis link this set built for the greater glory of US cinema to a life's journey which its characters set out upon at the beginning of the story. The result, unlike that of Griffith's film, is to give us the sense that the ephemeral nature of this kind of construction has a stable meaning and identity, unrelated to any instrumentalist aim, inscribed in a chain that links this work to the birthplace of its builders.

Cinema, we have suggested, is no stranger to historical revision. We have the example of Martin Scorsese and *Hugo* (2011), in which the US filmmaker depicts the production of one of Georges Méliès films. Or Richard Attenborough's *Chaplin* (1992), which, beneath its biographical skeleton, focused its interest on the early days of silent film, which it succeeded in recreating on various occasions. Averse to pretexts for nostalgia, the Tavianis conceive of *Good Morning, Babylon* as a film in which the artistic impulse denotes a special way of observing things. Behind the construction of the courtyard and wall for *Intolerance* there thus lies a single objective: to continue the tradition of the great masters, to prevent their disappearance over time. This is where the ephemeral kneels to embrace the identity that has been inscribed within the work. ■

Notes

1. On this point it is worth reading the chapter that Àngel Quintana, in his book *Fábulas de lo visible*, dedicates to the relationship between the realist novel and film narration. On the other hand, the best summary of the patchwork assembly that formed so-called classic cinema can be found in BORDWELL, David; STAIGER, Janet and THOMPSON, Kristin (1985). *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
2. And not only Martin; Vila, quoting Ramírez, points out influences as varied as the fantastic illustrations of Gustave Doré, the works of the naturalist Paul-Émile Botta, the images of the British painter and explorer William Ellis and the set of the Neo-Egyptian palace by the painter and architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel for the 1815 production of *The Magic Flute* (1997: 212). Berthome, meanwhile, points out the English painter and portraitist Edwin Long and his painting *Marriage Market in Babylon* (1875) as a decisive influence (2003: 41). Last of all, various sources found

online point out the Dutch painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema as another reference for understanding the creative process of *Intolerance*, particularly with respect to its organisation of space.

3. One of the best overviews of this generation of Italian film-makers, their aesthetic inheritances, stylistic discoveries and artistic importance can be found in MONTEVERDE, José Enrique (ed.) (2005). *En torno al nuevo cine italiano. Los años sesenta: realismo y poesía*. Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana.

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