

3. ... A LIMINAL JOURNEY...

Georgina Tarren-Sweeny on John Di Stefano's
Murmurations (Rome) (2017).

Murmurations (Rome) (2017) is a John Di Stefano single channel digital video and sound work (10:51). Commissioned by Mercedes Vicente as part of her curatorial project *Thick Cinema*, the film premiered in the auditorium of Te Puna O Waiwhetu-Christchurch Art Gallery on Friday 25 August. Watching *Murmurations (Rome)* in the gallery evoked certain shared resonances of trauma and its aftermath. Where Di Stefano's work addresses the legacy of fascism embedded in architecture, Christchurch City continues to rebuild after the 2011 earthquakes. And just as Di Stefano's work considers the history of public space, I'm reminded of the gallery's recent history. Deemed 'safe to occupy' in the aftermath of the earthquakes, it ceased to be an art gallery and became a day-glow moving picture of high-visibility-vested civic leaders, military, first responders, cordons and road cones. Screened in this site (now returned to us as an Art Gallery) John Di Stefano's liminal journey through Rome offers us a sister in celluloid, an overlay, gesturing toward cinematic and cultural courage in the face of many silences. *Murmurations (Rome)* opens in graphic darkness. In the quiet of that darkness, light enters in the form of an ambient soundscape, close muffled steps and the far away sounds of life being lived by two small things – a child and a bird. From within the sounds of life, Pasolini's voice speaks softly in Italian, gently urging us to be aware of our time above the ground:

"Here death's silence confirms the civic silence of men who remained men, a tedium that in the graveyards tedium is quietly transformed ...while the indifferent city..."

¹ Pier Pasolini Speaks retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IA1b-S1MRzw>

Suddenly we are looking at a grey sky with black specks; the specks become birds soaring to the edge and beyond the frame – *Murmurations*. They are starlings soaring across the sky. The framing is fixed; cinema as the lens framing our lives. If we try to follow individual patterns, the flight is swift and the bird suddenly gone from sight, the disappearance complete. Reflexively, the birds may leave the frame, but we are



Stills: John Di Stefano, *Murmurations (Rome)* (2017). Image courtesy of artist.
<http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/murmurations-rome>

contained, our lives discursively produced by cinema and mediated by social screens. A cut to black and the film's title:

Murmurations (Rome)

Into the light, we become aware of the camera pointing towards a ground of mosaics, patterns, patches. We are permitted to feel the walking of the cinematographer as the framing idles left to right, moving forward always forward. Pasolini's voice has already planted a whisper in our ear – the beginning of his poem. And in its absence we hear our own whispered thoughts, our own poem, and birdsong. Meshes and melds of chalk coloured mosaics and individual tiles pass below. Di Stephano plays with the languages of our visual literacies; the beginning of a clip uploaded to social media; academic abstraction of continuous recording to produce a static image; the domestic video camera inadvertently left on between shots. Here in the auditorium, the speeding image is putting us at risk of vertigo, but sharp cuts to black pull us back from the edge. Finally we look up to see the birds, now in greater numbers soaring in open patterns – *Murmurations*. The sounds of life continue and Pasolini returns:

*It carries all the greyness of the world, the close
of a decade Where we saw our keen and naïve
attempts to remake life end up among the ruins*

We return to the mosaics walking over those proclaiming Mussolini's title 'CDUCEDUCE' as Pasolini recites:

*and a sodden sterile silence...
...this silence...*

Di Stephano's framing muddles the letters that invested Mussolini as hero and leader, obscuring any remnant power resident in the clay. The camera marches across them, dismissive of their once monumental status. And while the camera is directed to the ground, we feel our faces looking upward and forward; Pasolini pushing us

on while the birds still sing and the muffled city moves.

‘...silence...’

An intertitle breaks the visual silence of our mosaic journey. We are in The Foro Italico, a sports complex built 1928-1938 by Mussolini to celebrate his Fascist regime. Contextually this intertitle is a time piece, time out, a place to pause and make sense of where we are and what we have experienced.

This is not a reverential articulation of Mussolini’s monument. Reference replaces reverence. Theorists and references, filmic and textual, fly into the mind, like emoticons when a social media post blows up; Godard, Vidal, Sala and Rossellini’s *Voyage to Italy* (1954) wilfully persist. But Pasolini is there before us, within the work, within the frame. His words and ideas materialised in a contemporary reading. Pasolini viewed the world as miraculous and phenomenological while identifying himself as Mystic, Marxist, Catholic and Atheist. But what we feel here is his expression of these philosophies as a filmmaker; celluloid intersections of his faiths. His voice, as he speaks *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (1957) has an imagistic capability, sending fragments from his films soaring like the birds, in and out of our sensorial frame – *Murmurations*. Gramsci is the subtext, questioning us, “Are we participating in our own subjugation? Are we willing actors in the mystification of our own consciousness?”² But the work is moving on and we cannot remain behind, we need to keep going.

The walking resumes and the ground has changed. We are no longer in The Foro Italico, built by Mussolini for aspiring Olympic heroes, gods. The ground is now uneven earth. The light moves towards darkness, catching a shadow, possibly the cinematographer and faint outline of a camera. The shadow, however fleeting, is the closest we have come to figuration, and it is a welcome intrusion into meditative abstraction. But we have been well prepared, and it is with ease that we feel it embody the demystification of in-

² *Hegemony of Common Sense: Interview Of Dean Manders* 6:42 retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0gp4t060xM>

dustrial cinema and mediated messages – its presence a Foucauldian brush stroke in Di Stefano's depiction of the perils of our social times and virtual worlds.

His touch is light but unswerving, alluding to the notion that images have a point of issue and a purpose. We enter a dark place where wall and ground have become indistinguishable from each other. Our senses have been alerted. We do not know the answer but we should ask the question. This dark place is Fosse Ardeatine, a catacomb, a below ground city of secrets for the living and the dead. Those who died for their beliefs in early Rome, and those who died for not believing, as our second millennium closed, massing its military might against soldier and civilian alike. This is both Memorial and Monument. And now we are on notice that awareness and engagement is essential for survival. These heroes were not aspiring Olympic athletes but ordinary men who paid dearly. These facts are literal, set in the stone; mosaics and catacombs. It is now that we remember the cinematographer's shadow and this time it is not Pasolini's images that visit us but those of Leni Riefenstahl and her cinematic accompaniment to the rise German fascism.

Out of this darkness we burst into the light of dusk, a half light of silhouette trees and birds soaring; the energetic noise of birds and families, of life:

*Flocks of up to a million starlings
- called murmurations -*

Sound of wind across a microphone and we are moving fast, along and across mosaic lines. This time speed induces vertigo and the need to look away becomes overwhelming, as is the wish to look back. There is no respite, no cut to black. A Brechtian distanciation is at work; we must look away to see more clearly, subjectively. As I look away, I see the 110,000 people experiencing one event as my city crumbled and the speed as we walked and ran to find our families. The city moved as one, in different directions. Auditoriums darkened, cell phones jammed and heels snapped. On

the banks of a river a flock of ducks stood in staunch formation, a perfect triangle, heads and eyes resolute and towards the south west, unflinching as we teemed past. Now, here in this auditorium, I am pleased to escape, back towards Di Stefano's speeding mosaics, to take the guidance offered.

As the journey continues we are in the darkness of a tomb. Colour emerges – hues of violet and gold confer respect and honour on its occupants and the stonemasons whose chisel marks remain from their lives above ground – they are all unknown and unknowable to us. Are they the same as those anonymous men and women who dig, hammer and chisel our City into life again? We are taken up above the ground by colours of almost tangible textures; gold, pale gold giving way to pale pink. We are offered colours as we move between the past and the present. It is dusk and the sky is striated with pink and blue. The starlings fill the sky in continuous harmony with each other. They perform their sublime *Murmurations*, their song and the sounds of family life being lived. And just as we feel no longer contained within the camera's gaze, their flight becomes a frame of film stock and we can walk through it. The end credits, a black graphic, Pasolini and Gramsci, they are leaving now but we still hear the birdsong, the sounds of life... *Murmurations (Rome)* lives, inside us... a tone poem.

Georgina Tarren-Sweeney's interest in the languages of visual culture has led to a number of projects that combine elements of performance, music and dance; but always Cinema. She moved to Christchurch in 2006 where she lives with her husband and three children. She has a BA in Art History (University of Canterbury) and would like to dedicate her essay to Associate Professor Ian Lochhead who always remains a voice in the Silence.