

# LACK OF LIGHT

DIEGO MARCON AND EVA FABBRIS  
IN CONVERSATION

Diego Marcon's second-to-latest work, *Monelle*, with which he was shortlisted for the MAXXI Bulgari Prize, was screened in September 2017 at the TopKino in Vienna, and has been recently presented at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Starting from this film project, Marcon looks back at his recent career together with Eva Fabbris, speaking of darkness and other obsessions.



Above and below - *Monelle* (behind the scenes), 2017. Produced by In Between Art Film.  
Courtesy: Ermes-Ermes, Vienna. Photo: Marco Cappelletti and Delfino Sisto Legnani  
Opposite - *Monelle* (CGI development screenshot), 2017. Produced by In Between Art Film.  
Courtesy: Ermes-Ermes, Vienna  
Next three spreads - *Monelle* (film frames), 2017. Produced by In Between Art Film.  
Courtesy: Ermes-Ermes, Vienna

















**EVA FABBRIS**

*Monelle* is unquestionably a key work in your practice. You chose an architectural setting for it which is the very emblem of that which is pure and rigorous, of the most advanced modernist ambitions, and which is closely bound up in the artistic culture of the black period of our national political past.

While you were shooting *Monelle*, controversy broke out in reaction to an article by Ruth Ben Ghiat in *The New Yorker* concerning how uncritically and apathetically Italians are used to living amid fascist architecture. You decided to make your way inside at night, into the Casa del Fascio. And it was there that you set a number of scary scenes, albeit scarcely visible. What led you there?

**DIEGO MARCON**

I wanted *Monelle* to be set in a place of power and administration but not in the place of a specific power or administration. Researching the buildings occupied by state organs and institutions, the two macro-categories that emerged—at least here in Italy—were that featuring architecture designed under fascist rule or that of more recent construction, of a business nature. The former, like for example that designed by Piacentini, is expressed through the use of gigantic, looming buildings that denote an attitude typical of 20th-century political regimes, in which power is underlined in each giant column and in every massive bas-relief. The latter, on the other hand, dissolves all form of identity and subjectivity in an anonymous sprawl of glass and mirrored surfaces. The Casa del Fascio by Terragni establishes a precise dialogue between pure geometric shapes, materializing a virtual and abstract space. Inside the building—which since the mid-1950s has been the provincial headquarters for Como of the Guardia di Finanza (finance police)—you have the distinct sensation of moving around a place of power, yet one manifested in a subtle and restless manner; it's a restlessness which is the reflection of a form of politics meant as an invisible, penetrating and all-enveloping force. This is a sentiment which is not directly connected to a given historical period or a given power, but which concerns an ontological aspect of the dynamics of power that the Casa del Fascio brings to light thanks to the formal synthesis it represents. For this reason, I find Italian rationalism among the most fascinating architectural forms ever, and that part of contemporary art is indebted to the formal stripping down implemented by figures such as Terragni.

Removal always underlines an ennobling of the object of removal, and in the proposal to destroy the material heritage of Fascism, I believe a sort of perverse veneration of Fascism itself is displayed. The ambiguity of seduction and fascination that we feel with regard to fascist architecture is in itself something very important from a critical point of view. The problem with an apathetic or non-critical outlook with which certain subjects may consider fascist architecture goes well beyond fascist architecture itself; it's a pedagogical issue that does not concern the artist.

**EF**

In the images of *Monelle*, the Casa del Fascio is hardly recognizable, if not through a few emblematic details of Terragni's materials and surfaces. But it is very present as an architectural space that is experienced. The flashes that illuminate the characters and details follow the order of an exploration of the ground floor, going up the stairs and looking around the first floor, twice over; obviously, when shown in a loop, these explorations continue ad infinitum, maintaining the regularity of the path. When the spectator goes beyond the fear and the curiosity with regard to the subjects that emerge all too quickly to be "resolved," during the dark moments in which their images remain faintly impressed upon the retina, he or she understands that the film camera is moving around this regular volume, exploring it without seeing it. In particular, when *Monelle* is shown in a cinema, the darkness in which the spectator is immersed seems to be made of the same matter as the darkness inside the Casa del Fascio. Like in the invisible cinema of Peter Kubelka, the absence of light offered by the film envelops the spectator in such a way as to also involve him or her physically in its magic...

**DM**

The filming process with which *Monelle* is shot is made up of short sequences visible for a second, and which in this time span contain the whole spectrum of the photographic exposition—from the first completely burnt frame, obtained during shooting with

studio flashlights, to the slow dissolution to black of the image, obtained through the lack of light caused by the dimming of steady lamps. Between every clip, there are long sequences of unexposed film. The spatialization and rendering of the architecture does not therefore take place as a reconfiguration of the space, made up of the coupling of images through the editing process, but rather as a single body through the insistent reiteration of its structural elements, such as glass-block walls, columns, bannisters and doors. As you said, the building takes shape as a single, regular volume—a mysterious presence, a monolith.

*Monelle* aims to be a meeting point between two different cinematographic approaches: the cold and analytical one of Structural film, and a more sentimental and spectacular one, typical of the entertainment cinema genre. On one hand, the work uses a strictly followed yet arbitrary structure to shoot the images and carry out the editing process, tracing the layout of the Casa del Fascio; on the other, the film uses a number of archetypal figures of horror cinema. In this hybridization process—which is also present in the use of two very different formats: 35mm and CGI animation—lies the intention for *Monelle* to constitute an opaque and ambiguous place inhabited by the restlessness to which cinema has historically brought to life. This emotional impact is, I believe, unleashed by the cold and rigorous structure of *Monelle*: In the end, the clinical attitude of Structural film—which sections and analyzes audiovisual materials and languages with great coldness—may resemble that of a mad scientist who in a well-lit basement is found cutting up and analyzing corpses, following his own personal and outlandish intuition.

**EF**

In relation to the density of this darkness, I'm reminded of your white film, *Pour vos beaux yeux*, 2013, in which the eye of the spectator has to get used to the blinding white of a sky with moving clouds. While toying with a potentially metaphysical subject, in actual fact you were already working perversely on our sight...

**DM**

Yes, *Pour vos beaux yeux* is a film on the gaze that attempts to take the very act of looking to the edge. The film is almost completely overexposed and installed in such a way that all the brightness of the projection is concentrated on a very small surface, and so the gaze's exposure to the film becomes a somewhat violent experience. By slowly making one's sight accustomed to the brightness of the image, the cloud bodies start to become defined and the retina, by compensation, fills up with their volume, which takes on a their negative when you blink or close your eyes. The cloud too is a *topos* of representation—a subject that can be focused on only in the distance: if you are close up or in the middle of it, like in flight, the cloud disappears. I believe that thinking about the representation of the cloud makes it possible to think of representation itself and its relationship with reality.

**EF**

It's a theme that I think you already dealt with in the past, in a manner more adherent to the tangible datum, with *Litania*: your work shot in Medjugorje. I say "tangible," I might say "earthly," but in any case I say it paradoxically, as you did with regard to the theme of the sacred that you were dealing with, filming the place of prayer, complete with statues and pilgrims, and the surrounding nature. After a sequence on clouds at sunset, that place is also slowly immersed in darkness, and you restore the religious expectations to the black frame. In the initial sequence, a genuine prologue, the camera is behind a girl walking up to the place of prayer. It lasts almost five minutes, and I might say that this makes her one of your main character.

**DM**

*Litania*, shot in a site famous for appearances of the Virgin Mary, is a video which, on drawing closer to the vision, loses the faculty of sight. My research started out inside documentary cinema and what I have always been interested in was defining works with which it was possible to render a profound sense of realism. For this reason, I have never produced "topic-based" video, but videos in which the theme and the form that the work takes are intimately bound up in one another, in order to develop a metalinguistic discourse on the format, also aimed at sounding out its potential as a tool linked to an investigation of reality. I have always been interested in apophatic theology according to which the possibility to know God—who for

Above - *Untitled (Head falling 02)* (film frame), 2015. Courtesy: Ermes-Ermes, Vienna  
Below - *Untitled (Head falling 02, 05)*, 2015, *FRANTI, FUORI!!* installation view at Careof, Milan, 2015. Courtesy: Ermes-Ermes, Vienna. Photo: Alessandro Nassiri





me is a synonym of the Real—may only take place through its negation. The same goes for the Real, with which an encounter is always denied, unless in a state of psychosis, which according to mystics is a state of ecstasy. In *Litania* the image slowly sinks into darkness, only to continue with sound alone, testifying to the presence of another, invisible dimension, beyond the gaze and the physical presence. In this sense, *Litania* is a visual work in which the sound aspect emerges as preminent. The long opening sequence that you are referring to—in which a girl crosses an acoustic landscape which goes from the voices and music of the crowd of Medjugorje to the chirping of the cicadas in nature—serves as a sort of opera overture: a sequence in which all the motifs and themes of the video are already to be found, in a literally musical sense.

*Litania* also dragged my own work into the dark. It's from that darkness that for the first time I felt the desire to shoot on film, and it was from there that *Pour vos beaux yeux* came to light—produced in a darkroom with DIY movie film development techniques—and the desire to work with fiction. And it's in that darkness that my work is now to be found.

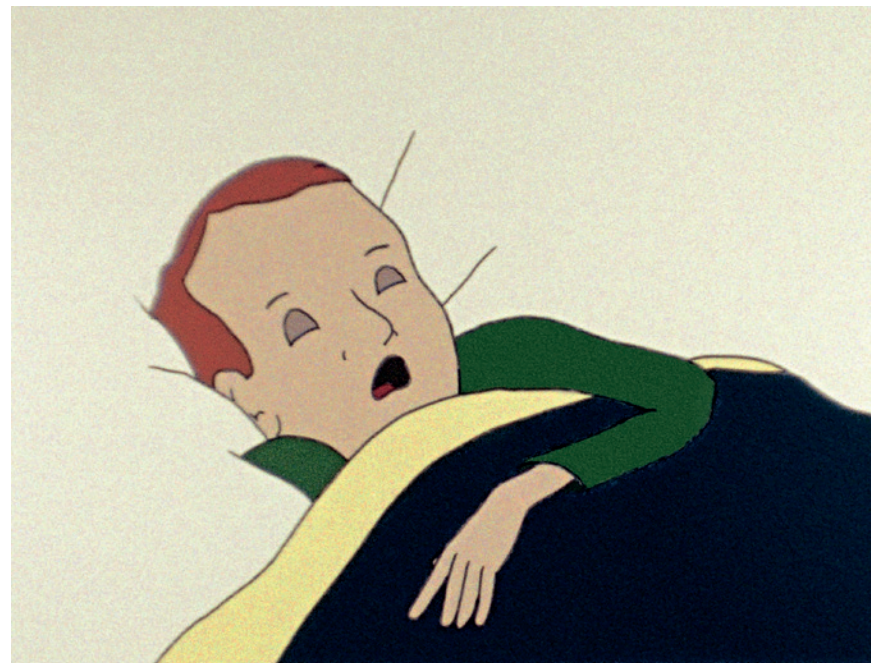
**EF** Shortly after *Litania* you started on cartoons. Which was the first? I'd like you to talk to me about their degree of graphic abstraction...

**DM** The first work in which I used animation was *Interlude (introducing Dick the Stick)*, produced immediately after *Pour vos beaux yeux*. It was like outlining a cloud, and it was a short film in which a soldier—Dick the Stick—polishes a boot. Dick then went on as a character who accompanied me outside the comfort zone of my work, taking on other forms such as huge stickers or a neon sign. From *Interlude (introducing Dick the Stick)* onwards, it became fundamental for me that each work should contrast with the previous, also on a technical level, thus forcing upon me the marvel and surprise that are an intrinsic part of every experimental process. This was the start of the series of animated films painted and scratched onto 16mm—*Untitled (Head falling)*—*Untitled 2017*, an animated film using adhesive meshes and vinyl stickers, *Monelle* and the latest film, *Il malatino*, in which a child, sick in bed, breathes with great difficulty, nailed to a loop which confines him to a perpetual convalescence from which he never gets better nor dies. With these works, I also started to think about films as a physical presence, existing beyond the gaze of the audience and the times imposed by the cinematographic experience: these are works designed to be free-standing, independent of any gaze. They draw on a range of techniques, from the more traditional, such as drawing, illustration and cartoons, to the more experimental, such as cameraless animation or CGI. In a certain sense, they are like sketches or drawings in which something—often minimal—moves, animating a restless presence which is allowed neither to perish nor to develop, making them all never-endingly rotate around themselves, however logorrheic and pedantic.

**EF** One of your most successful loops in this sense, in my opinion, is the sound work *ToonsTunes (Four Pathetic Movements)*, an agonizing montage of Donald Duck sounds, almost an “imageless” version of the videos of Martin Arnold. But let's go back to visible characters. These presences introduced to scare the darkness and as experiments with film techniques share an empathic sphere with the audience. They have recurring features: firstly their frequently being adolescents; they are often in states of immobility or lack of control (asleep, ill, fallen, dragged...). Most of all, your bodies are defenseless. There is the expressivity of the horror repertoires that you mentioned with regard to *Monelle*, but there's also the strange fulcrum of your solo show in Careof (Milan), *FRANTI, FUORI!:* *Untitled (All pigs must die)*, a very brief extract from Winnie the Pooh, in which Piglet goes to bump into at Owl's window, waking him up with a start while dozing on a rocking chair. And in that show, all around there were your dangling heads, scratched onto film. What does “pathetic” mean for you?

**DM** For me, pathetic is the human condition and its persevering in dragging itself like its own burden. This is why my characters

are exhausted. There's something profoundly painful and at the same time incredibly comical about this. Living is miserable and nobody is saved. This is perhaps why you find that my work can empathize with anyone: at least I share the experience with them of being in the world and that's it. It's an experience in which a sense of alienation and solitude is renewed every day. Every human activity serves to drive this feeling away from the heart. “We vegetate in a repellent society which has ceased to mortally wound itself,” Thomas Bernhard has Minetti say in a theater play of his. I think the role of art remains that of driving everything over the edge, pitching it into catastrophe. Though even this undertaking sounds pretty pathetic.



Above - *Il malatino* (film frame), 2017. Commissioned and produced by MiBACT and AMACI for “Museo Chiama Artista 2017.” Courtesy: the artist and AMACI – Associazione dei Musei d'Arte Contemporanea Italiani  
Opposite - *The flintlock (Dick the Stick's Saga)*, 2016, *Art Situations II* installation view at Matadero, Madrid, 2016. Courtesy: Art Situacions. Photo: Paco Gómez

**Eva Fabbris** (1979) lives and works in Milan. An art historian and curator, she is a member of the research department of the Fondazione Prada.

**Diego Marcon** (1985) is an artist who lives and works in Milan.

