

Anthony Cristiano

"I'm Not Scared"...I'm marketable

Niccolò Ammaniti's novel and Gabriele Salvatores' homonymous film "*I'm Not Scared*" have had their share of popularity in North America if not by gaining a conspicuous readership/spectatorship by travelling into the publicity-wagon of international distributors.¹ The formula adopted by both writer and filmmaker appealed to investors as a marketable recipe and yet it failed to magnetize the scattered reader/viewer beyond a short flight-of-entertainment.²



Scene from the film *I'm Not Scared*

The elements at play in the novel and film are quite remarkable for their traditionally universal appeal.³ The fates of two adolescents, one jailed the other unwilling jailer, intersect and are soon bound together in a struggle for survival at the hands of unsuspecting enemies. The filmmaker's aim was to adopt a child's unadulterated point of view in referential opposition to the surrounding adult world. Given the suspenseful plot and the exploration of the young protagonists' fears at coping with a habitat they must disavow, such an aim and narrative scheme were expected to gather much attention.⁴ The pre-teens Michele, the novel's principal hero, and Filippo the kidnapped child are ultimately elevated from a pit of dirt and fear, the antechamber of death, chiefly by their own heroic praxis. Yet the problematic lack of any meaningful degree of depth in the novel and film seems to lie precisely with its overly schematic construction, tailored to safely weather the otherwise unpredictable market.

The proscription from any domain of memorable works may be due to a major problem both in the novel and film: the ambiguous point of view adopted. The novel is geared for a transposition to the screen. It is no coincidence that the film was scripted by Niccolò Ammaniti, who adapted his own novel to be storyboarded and has expressed his desire to move behind the camera as a film director. The goal of wanting to take up the point of view of a child is shared by both scriptwriter and director. In the cover story that appeared in the North American Film Review, Nicki Goldstein reports the following:

The book, "*I'm Not Scared*", is a work of fiction [...] on his work with the Director of Photography, Italo Petriccione, in wanting the view of a child, Mr. Salvatores stated "We tried to put the public in the same conditions as the child's, so the camera is almost placed at the eye level of the child. Looking up at the world from below, many perspectives become clearer.

Michele was [...] a little over 4 feet." (Goldstein, 6-7)

Is it a sustained effort to report on the world from the viewpoint of a child or an adult's recollection disguised through the eyes and mind of a pre-teen? The question is begged by what makes such an ambiguity problematic: we witness neither the deployment of a coherent narrative technique nor the study of unexplored territories or communication of new ideas, but rather an escape from such endeavours for the sake of marketability.

In an interview Ammaniti struggled to explain what made the novel appealing to different readers, then to supplement the classic theme of a child's loss of innocence added that " If the book were only one thing or the other, it wouldn't have worked as well [...]" and concluded that "the story delves into the kind of practical psychological tensions that almost any reader can identify with."⁵ In its aim at targeting "almost any" reader and broaden its market "I'm Not Scared" has little to fear. Very little effort is put into communicating ideas whereas freewill is given to the juxtaposition of fragmented and in some cases disjointed lines of thought / sequences of images. I subscribe to the notion that the effectiveness of conveying any ideas to others is directly proportional to the unambiguous content of such thoughts as well as the univocal modes of transference employed. Efficacy demands that communication be unequivocal. The contrary is true for captivating the attention of an impressionable mind. The great majority of today's market schemes with regards to the written word and the production of time-based works aim at doing the latter. They demand sustained concentration from the reader/spectator by injecting into the narrative 'morsels' of vital information, of what is made to appear a fulfilling 'meal,' at intervals that are safe enough to transport the consumer to the end of a briskly read narrative.

It will suffice to elaborate on one explicative instance carried forward throughout the novel and film, Michele's childhood fears. Ammaniti inserts into his novel common literary references and allusions to films in resemblance of a hotchpotch worth of most popular standard comic books. On page 38 of the novel we read the following:

I woke up during the night. I had a nightmare. Jesus was telling Lazarus to rise and walk. But Lazarus didn't rise. [... Jesus] was being made to look a fool. When Jesus tells you to rise and walk, you have to do it, especially if you're dead. But Lazarus just lay there, stiff as a board. So Jesus started shaking him like a doll and Lazarus finally rose up and bit him in the throat. Leave the dead alone, he said with blood-smeared lips.⁶

The preceding one by a blank line separates the paragraph as if a time gap occurred. The nightmarish thoughts are supposed to be those of the pre-teen Michele. He is the one speaking in the first person as indicated in the introductory line "I woke up during the night. I had a nightmare."⁷ Yet in later pages, and without any premonitory sign or inkling of a transition from one narrator to another, this same voice suddenly becomes that of an adult. An adult Michele, or the implied author's own voice as the extradiegetic narrator, tells now of his papa and how "Even today I can't stand people who don't give vent to their anger." (Ammaniti, 51) What makes it ambiguous is that both voices speak as participants

in the events of the story, whereas in a third-person narrative the narrators would stand outside of those events. This confusion doesn't seem to have any other purpose than that of accelerating the pace of the story, leaving the filling of any 'inconsequential' gap to the reader, if it did not pass by altogether unnoticed. Therefore the pre-teen Michele on page 38 and throughout the bulk of the story becomes either a non-introduced adult Michele on page 51, 55, 117 etc., or more simply the novel is not written from the standpoint of a child, as it is deceptively made to appear. What is more confusing is that the narrator is an unreliable and intrusive one at the same time, and even omniscient at times. Thus half way through the novel we read:

When the old man came into my room I was just getting organized to foil the monsters. When I was small I always dreamed about monsters. And even now, as an adult, I sometimes dream about them, but I can't foil them any more. (Ammaniti, 117)

Then later on, in the next 50 pages, we learn along with him who the real monsters are, and such a realization is supposedly meant to justify the satiric turn in the Lazarus story and make the same a brave model to be emulated. In fact at the end, in his quest to save the life of Filippo, Michele finally seems to overcome his fears: "The secret was to keep in the middle of the road, but I must be ready for danger. Lazarus wasn't scared of anything." (Ammaniti, 207)⁸ Yet the fears he has overcome cannot then be those of a child since the narrator admits to be an adult, "'even now" recalling his life as a child.

To replicate the same confusion in the film would have meant to give the young protagonist the detached interior voice of an adult in addition to his childhood one. Ammaniti and Salvatores have definitely avoided such ambiguity in the film. The presence of an adult's voice would have compromised the entire scheme of the film. It would have meant admitting to an adult's recollection of childhood and it would have entirely changed the film's genre. Therefore every such instance present in the pages of the book has been systematically avoided in the film. Yet the film does not sound true to its original story or to that of a child's tale. On par with the book the film's concern is not depth of vision or feeling but an evenly paced narrative scored at regular intervals by a soothing quartet. The relationship between adults and children is made shallow and perfunctory. The movements and placement of the camera are dictated by the need to embellish the tale and not by the child's struggle with fear. Such is the case when the camera is mounted on crane-like high angles to capture the waves of wheat that cover the hills or on the ground to capture children and helicopter in the same frame field when exploring the territory. Furthermore, filmmaker and screenwriter have avoided re-enacting the violent scenes between Pino, Felice, and Sergio as related in the story.⁹ They have modified the movements and reactions of the characters to suit the demands of a linear production and product. The film is concerned with a sequential rendition that favours a smooth story rather than an in-depth study of the characters.

Salvatores and Ammaniti have chosen to run in the middle of a forked path out of what appears to be a marketing need to appeal to a broader range of readers/spectators. The result is a puzzling point of view that is neither that of a child nor that of a grown-up. What are we left with then? The outcome is the portrayal of a hybrid protagonist and an expandable story supported by the

ambiguous choices made by the authors. Novel and film are trite products of the thriller genre, more the effects of a contemporary visual memory made up of celluloid (and now ethereal and virtual) portraits of the world, rather than a historic awareness and reconstruction of the year 1978.¹⁰

Any Italian scholar or historian cannot but notice and contrast the memorial-tablet-like place given to the year 1978 in the book and movie, and the utter lack of reference to the contingent and relevant events taking place, in spite of the conspicuous audio and visual media present in the story, script, and film.¹¹ The 1970s are years of terrorism and despair in Italy, referred to as 'gli anni di piombo' (The Years of the Bullet'), which absorbed the nation as a whole. The end of this notorious decade marks a transformation of the social and political panorama of the country as indicated by a number of emblematic events converging on the pinnacle-like year 1978. Among these must be counted the kidnapping and murder of the prime minister Aldo Moro, the election of John Paul II, the resignation of President Giovanni Leone and election of former partisan leader Sandro Pertini, and the passing of the abortion law. Thus the year 1978 made predominant on page 2 and again on page 31 of Ammaniti's novel¹², is a marked date in Italian history due to the influential events that have taken place. The choice of making such a major date conspicuous in the story and then retreating from informing it with proper significance leaves the reader with the impression of a narrative found utterly wanting. If the elements at play in the story lend themselves to an allegorical portrayal of one of the most intriguing and darker end of decades in Italian history, this opportunity was missed by the very composition and modes of the narrative in favour of producing an entertaining work of sellable fiction. If there is much to tell about the social history and culture of contemporary Italy this was forsaken in exchange of a complacent success formula. Mr. Repetti, an executive at Einaudi, stated the following: "the novel, in its appeal and impact, represents a rare hybrid of serious literature and potboiler, of rite-of-passage classic and read-right-away pulp."¹³ Particularly artificial and calculated appears the ending of the film. Unlike the ambiguous closing lines of the novel, where Michele's death is surreptitiously alluded to but not stated, at the conclusion of the film the director has chosen to round up four of the leading characters for their reward and retribution. Under the light of the authorities' helicopters Pino feels sorry while embracing his wounded son, Sergio is captured, and the two little heroes stretch out their arms towards each other, while the stringed quartet plays its last strokes. This too is meant to suit "almost any" spectator. In such a context there is little reason to be 'scared' of the mainstream and fashionable market.

Works cited

Ammaniti, Niccolò. *I'm Not Scared*. Trans. Jonathan Hunt. Edinburgh: Conongate Books, 2003.

Brizzi, Enrico. *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo*. Firenze: Baldini e Castoldi Dalai, 2004.

Bruni, Frank. "Whatever You Do, Little Boy, Don't Look Down," New York Times, April 4th 2004.


Cohen, Keith, ed. *Writing in a Film Age: Essays by Contemporary Novelists*. Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1991.


Ginsborg, Paul. *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*. New York: Palgrave, 2003.


Goldstein, Nicki. *North American Film Review* May/June (2004): 6-7.


Salvatores, Gabriele. *I'm Not scared ...* Perf. Giuseppe Cristiano and Diego Abatantuono. Colorado Film Production, 2003.

Notes


¹  In one instance a direct witness, one of the North American distributor's employees who attended the Toronto 2003 release of the film, referred that the audience gathered in a first rate theatre for its premiere was a mere handful of people.


²  This scribe's enjoyment of both novel and film were limited to such light entertainment.

³  It must be noted that beyond the classic tales, and few exceptions (i.e. *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo*), the adolescent or pre-teen novel has never been an Italian literary prerogative.


⁴  The Academy Awards in spite of the allegedly unanimous consensus gathered in the home country rejected Salvatores' film. In North America the novel is essentially a bestseller within educational circles.


⁵  Quoted by Frank Bruni, "*Whatever You Do, Little Boy, Don't Look Down*".

⁶  In the novel it is told that the story of Lazarus is learned at school from the schoolteacher, Signorina Destani, p. 83.




⁷  In fact the entire novel is set in the first person with Michele's voice assuming the narration in the initial race held with his neighboring peers. The incipit reads: "I was just about to overtake Salvatore when I heard my sister scream."

⁸  207.

⁹  Compare pages 155-157, 201-203 of the book with the same scenes in the film.

¹⁰  The effects of a filmic memory on the written word have been reason for study/confession of contemporary novelists. See Cohen, Keith, ed. *Writing in a Film*

Age: Essays by Contemporary Novelists.

- 11  See Paul Ginsborg's *A History of Contemporary Italy*, 383-405.
- 12  In the film the date 1978 appears superimposed in the opening sequence.
- 13  Quoted by Frank Bruni.