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The French Connection (*Il braccio violento della legge*; USA, 1971) regia: William Friedkin; *produzione*: Philip D'Antoni per 20th Century Fox; *soggetto*: dal romanzo *The French Connection* di Robin Moore; *sceneggiatura*: Ernest Tidyman; *fotografia*: Owen Roizman; *montaggio*: Gerald Greenberg; *scenografia*: Ben Kasazkow; arredatore: Edward Garzero; *costumi*: Joseph Fretwell III; *interpreti*: Gene Hackman, Fernando Rey, Roy Scheider, Tony Lo Bianco, Marcel Bozzuffi; colore, 104'

Il vero *expanded cinema* americano, dagli anni Settanta in poi, è più plausibilmente rintracciabile in quei film (di durata normale) che, pur nei predeterminati limiti (anche spettacolari), ridondano, sconfinano, esondano, per virtù narrative e compositive proprie, modellandosi su una cartografia in divenire. Proprio seguendo il processo di sconfinamento che coinvolge la città contemporanea: multipla, dilatata, priva di confini definibili. L'*expanded cinema* sperimentale, quello intenzionalmente anarrativo, pur stimolante e intenso, è rimasto indietro rispetto all'*expanded cinema* senza confini di registi-architetti come William Friedkin, Brian De Palma, Walter Hill, Martin Scorsese, Abel Ferrara, John Carpenter, Kathryn Bigelow, Michael Mann e, ultimo arrivato, Christopher Nolan. Vale a dire quei (pochi) registi hollywoodiani che ci portano a (ri)scoprire e (re)inventare mondi, città, luoghi – a volte intere galassie.

In *The French Connection*, New York è la “capitale del dolore”. Soprattutto nella sua variante specifica di Brooklyn – negli anni Settanta non era l'odierna Brooklyn ripulita e alla moda, bensì una periferia degradata, crocevia del traffico di droga e di ogni altro commercio illegale. O per lo meno così la vuole evidenziare William Friedkin, girando tutto dal vero e premendo a fondo il pedale dello sfacelo a cielo aperto, della deriva metropolitana.

La NY-Brooklyn del film è una *spoilt city* fortemente accentrata e reticolare, racchiusa dentro una spirale di strade e destinata a ritornare continuamente sui suoi passi e contrappassi. (È per contrappuntare questa occorrenza labirintica che Friedkin fa iniziare il film in una solare mediterranea Marsiglia). Una NY-Brooklyn fatta tutta di vie di fuga e di dolore. Nei primi action-movies modernisti l'inseguimento è mutuato dal western classico. Qui, invece, troviamo una serie ininterrotta di inseguimenti “elevati a principale meccanismo stilistico”, così che “i personaggi sembrano abbozzati e sono definiti meglio dai loro mezzi di trasporto” (Carlos Clarens). Il che equivarrebbe a dire, ripensando al western classico, che l'attenzione si sposta dal cavaliere al cavallo. Come nel western, però, avvertiamo, grazie alla velocità degli

spostamenti, la percorribilità indefinita dello spazio, il desiderio irrefrenabile di evasione da una prospettiva all'altra.

La griglia metropolitana è vivificata, diviene un territorio dove si esprime la violenza dei rapporti diretti, e dove ogni sorta di avventure e incontri imprevisi sono sempre possibili. Almeno fino all'inseguimento-apice, l'orgastico inseguimento automobilistico a un convoglio della metropolitana. L'insistenza sul pedinamento, sulla sorveglianza spinge i personaggi fuori dalla consueta caratterizzazione psicologica, sembrano diventati pura funzione: inseguire ed essere inseguiti, sorvegliare ed essere sorvegliati, correre senza sosta - per raggiungere o per non essere raggiunti. La funzione cui obbedisce il protagonista-poliziotto Popeye (Gene Hackman) – inseguire, braccare, raggiungere i gangster – non si esaurisce insieme all'intreccio. Come un pupazzo meccanico a cui sia stata data una carica eccessiva, Popeye continua a fare ciò che ha fatto fino a quel momento, noncurante che l'intreccio sia giunto a conclusione, lungo uno sviluppo sempre più astratto, all'interno di una mirabile geometria visiva metropolitana. Lo spazio urbano, e in particolare la sotterranea di New York, permette di costruire tra i due antagonisti, il poliziotto e il capo malavitoso, un balletto coordinato e preciso, dove i gesti dell'uno vengono riprodotti dall'altro. Tra loro, durante tutto il film, non ci sarà mai contatto diretto.

The French Connection is based on a real case that took place in New York in the 1970s. Friedkin calls the film an "impression of that case," but the main characters of Popeye Doyle and Buddy Russo are based on real-life detectives Eddie Egan and Sonny Grosso. Everything is shot on real locales, not sets, giving the film a documentary feel. Friedkin had a history with making documentaries, and this was his first chance at using some of those techniques in a narrative film. As part of the documentary feel of the film, Friedkin would not go through what action was about to take place with the camera operator, Enrique Bravo. The operator would have to keep up and capture whatever he could on film to the best of his abilities. (Bravo: "I let the camera crew go and find the action, as if it's real"). Friedkin and cinematographer Owen Roizman acted like they were a *cinéma vérité* crew. They emphasized the drudgery of police work, showing Hackman's Popeye freezing on the gray sidewalks of collapsing New York neighborhoods, watching his prey dine in warm, orange-hued supper clubs, and stole shots that the New York City Film Commission would never have approved—including one of the most thrilling chases ever filmed, done without permits. As brilliantly executed as the chase scene is, it would mean little without the grindingly realistic context that Friedkin provided in his choice for the sets - New York City on the verge of economic collapse. The evocative locations were chosen with the help of Fat Thomas, a downtown bartender that a journalist friend recommended to Friedkin as one of the few connaisseurs of the 'real' city.

"Most films are not shot in sequence. Our chase scene was shot entirely out of sequence, and over a period of about five weeks. It did not involve solid day-to-day shooting. One reason was that we were given permission to use only one particular Brooklyn line, the Stillwell Avenue, running from Coney Island into Manhattan. After numerous location scouting trips with Utt and

Ganapoler, we found a section of the Stillwell Line that we thought would be ideal, stretching from Bay 50th Street to 62nd Street.

It seemed right because the Marlboro housing project was located just two blocks from the entrance to the Bay 50th Street Station. The project was perfect for Doyle's apartment building, and it stood directly across the street from the Stillwell track.

Together with Utt, Ganapoler, my cameraman, Owen Roizman, and the first assistant director, Terry Donnelly, I proceeded to plan a shooting sequence. We knew that in shooting in the middle of winter, we might run into a number of unforeseen problems. But no one could have guessed at some of the ones we were eventually hit with.

I decided to divide the shooting into two logical segments: the train and the car. They had to be shot separately, of course, but at times we had to have both for tie-in shots. I had hoped for bad weather because it would help the look and the excitement. But, of course, I also hoped for consistent light. (...) As it happened, the New York winter of 1970-71 was not a mild one. It was painfully cold through most of December and January, when the chase was filmed. Very often it was so cold—sometimes five degrees above zero—that our camera equipment froze, or the train froze and couldn't start. One day, the special effects spark machine didn't work, again because of the cold. Once, the equipment rental truck froze. We seldom had four good hours of shooting a day while inside the train.

A part of our concept was that the pursuit should be happening during a normal day in Brooklyn. It was important that we tie in the day-to-day activity of people working, shopping, crossing the street, walking along, whatever. This meant that while the staging had to be exciting, we had to exercise great caution because we'd be involving innocent pedestrians. Street to 62nd Street, a total of eight local stops and about 26 blocks. But there was a catch: we could only shoot between the hours of ten in the morning and three in the afternoon. This was the time between the rush hours. (...) It also meant that we would have to be so well-planned that every actor, every stuntman, and every member of the crew knew exactly what was expected of him. It meant that I would have to lay out a detailed shot-by-shot description of what was going to wind up on the screen before I had shot it.

Five specific stunts were planned within the framework of the chase. These were to occur along various points of the journey of the commandeered car. They were to be crosscut with shots of Doyle driving fast and with the action that was going on in the train above.

A word about the commandeered car: It was a brown, 1970 Pontiac, four-door sedan, equipped with a four-speed gearshift. We had a duplicate of this car with the back seat removed so we could slip in camera mounts at will. The original car was not gutted, but remained intact so that it would be shot from the exterior.

The entire chase was shot with an Arriflex camera, as was most of the picture. There was a front bumper mount, which usually had a 30- or 50-millimeter lens set close to the ground for point-of-view shots. Within the car, there were two mounts. One was for an angle that would include Hackman driving and shoot over his shoulder with focus given to the exterior. The other was for straight-ahead points-of-view out the front window, exclusive of Gene Hackman. (...) While it was desirable to have Gene Hackman in the car as much as possible, we hired one of the best stunt drivers from Hollywood, Bill Hickman, to drive the five stunts. Consulting with Bill Hickman, I determined what the stunts would be, trying to take advantage of the particular topography of the neighborhood." (William Friedkin)