An honest look at the lives of Italian inmates

Marc Wells
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Quintosole, written and directed by Marcellino de Baggis.

At a time when a typical Hollywood movie budget ranges in the tens of millions of dollars, most of which is spent on hiring popular actors and producing sensational special effects, the simplicity and austerity of a low budget documentary like *Quintosole* has a lot more to tell us about social reality than most heavy box office hitters.

Italian writer-director Marcellino de Baggis' self-financed effort, *Quintosole*, depicts the social and psychological implications of the founding of the FreeOpera soccer team inside the maximum security Opera prison in Rozzano, near Milan. The work is being offered as a free Creative Commons License download from http://www.quintosole.com/english.htm.

While soccer supplies the storyline, the documentary focuses on the stories and reflections of the inmates, the development of new types of relations and their meaning. Throughout the film, prisoners are offered an opportunity to express various insights, more or less profound, and describe the real conditions of prison life.

Mario, one of the principal characters, and doubtlessly the most poetic, opens the film by describing the book he is writing. It concerns an inmate, his initial hopes of being acquitted, his gradual realization that what seemed like a temporary condition is becoming a final and perhaps even fatal status, as well as his analysis of what can be endured by a human being who is detained under socially alienating circumstances and for how long. He reflects on the meaning of life and determines that it has value only if an individual is insightful, introspective and courageous enough to question things with a critical mind.

He analyzes the process by which the prisoner adapts himself to prison: first, the inmate feels charged up, ready to fight the system that represses him. Then, habit reduces much of the turmoil and he gets "used to it," as Mario emphasizes. He observes that, while this might seem like a positive development, this process creates the variant of a delusional state, a disconnect from the world, literally something "like going crazy," as the inmate ceases to fight.

Mario introduces the role of the newly formed soccer team of inmates, equating the latter to faucets that have "backed up." Soccer, in this case, helps to "unblock the stoppage." He explains how the game offered the prisoners a positive opportunity, both to be on the outside and, more importantly, to improve their mental states.

These considerations set the stage for the exploration of the effects of healthy social intercourse on the prisoners, despite the obviously unfavorable conditions of detention. The inmates engage in a simple game, an activity that emphasizes equality, reciprocal reliability and social responsibility.

This web of newly created relations becomes more obvious as Roberto, an inmate in charge of drawing the chalk lines on the soccer field—sometimes in the most difficult weather—explains the importance of his duty on the basis of solidarity with his fellow prisoners.

Damiano talks about the founding of the prison soccer team. At least 1,400 inmates in Italy applied for it, showing an objective necessity for social involvement and escape from isolation.

We then encounter Leonard, a candid Eastern European immigrant, who recounts his upbringing in a Stalinist country. In that environment he reacted to the injustices and inequalities of a repressive system with the feeling that he had to defend himself and his family at any cost. This defense mechanism soon transformed into an "offensive" one in order to satisfy the basic needs that a corrupt system could not fulfill.

Leonard praises the prison warden for having introduced the team, which dramatically shifted the focus of his thoughts. He now thinks positively, contrary to his past periods of reclusion in prisons that kept him locked up all day. His rage would accumulate and his only ambition was "to get out and destroy everything."

The warden's commitment is, however, conditional upon the inmates' performance (and what about the players who do not make the team?). We learn that unless the team wins the championship the program will be dropped. Mario elaborates on the consequences of its possible disappearance: inmates would regress into the previous state, dominated by depression, brutality and introversion.

Mario discusses the state of an inmate on the eve of his release. He asks: "Have you ever felt inside yourself a winter so cold, sad and harsh that no sun, no smile and no compassion could warm it?"

The newly released inmate is incapable of coming to terms with the outside world, the same world he dreamed of the entire duration of his detention. He picks up his personal belongings and contemplates the old picture on his ID, the familiar image of a young man or boy from years before, who was tired of injustice in a hostile world and who offered his life to fate. The boy's eyes speak about the pursuit of justice, truth, a meaning to things. He would like to tell the boy (his former self) that these years in prison helped him in such a pursuit; however, "the boy's eyes deserve the truth."

Mario's conclusion is a positive one, the hope that release can perhaps offer a better life in a better world, although his tone is careful, somber—he underlines the word "perhaps." This is not delusional ranting, or merely the poetic charm of an oppressed soul; on the contrary, these are the thoughts of a human being who has been able to process personal experience and extreme life conditions with rationality and emotional stability, against the odds.

He reminds the viewer that, contrary to popular belief, the release date is not the happiest day of a prisoner's life: after years of isolation the inmate has endured psychological and physical suffering and extreme isolation from the world he is about to re-enter. This sets the stage for a profound fear and uncertainty about not being accepted by the world outside. As Nicola later puts it, it seems paradoxical, but the real difficulties are outside, when you are fully responsible for your life after a prolonged period of social inertia.

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Among the inmates, Rodolfo manifests a level of intellectual depth, sometimes coupled with a sense of demoralization, when he acknowledges that the soccer team itself "is not something incredibly full of meaning." There is no illusion that it delivers the type of solution that the issue of detention in an industrialized country calls for; however, it does add a new dimension to Sundays for those thirty players as well as the rest of the inmates who provide the fan base. As he states, it distracts them from "the same old stuff" and stimulates their minds.

Rodolfo emphasizes the importance of exploring objective reality by any means of communication. He notes how an extraordinary event like the formation of the soccer team has attracted the interest of "cameras."

He points out that using a camera does not necessarily imply objectively depicting reality. The interests behind the camera ultimately determine what the content of such depiction will be. As he comments, those interests may want to show that prison is not that bad after all. In one stroke, he demystifies the role of the media.

Some of the other inmates do not even play. We are told of one of them, the "team mascot," who is always present, "always running like hell" to get rid of the stress, to leave the cell, in a word to feel alive.

Remand prisoner Altin, an immigrant, gives a detailed description of his living conditions in jail. The cell is smaller than the inside of the goal on the soccer field. In this space, there are two beds, a bathroom behind one of the beds and no windows. He is allowed 3 hours a day outside, the only time of his day when he thinks about life and his family, as the conditions inside the cell are not conducive to anything intellectual or even physical.

One by one, the inmates confess the tactical mistakes they have made on the soccer field that may have cost the team some matches. They are obviously concerned and aware of the consequences of their errors, perhaps in a way they were not at the time they committed their *crimes*. Leonard himself tells about the time he hesitated in front of an unguarded goal, missing the opportunity to score. During his life, he says, he never hesitated to attack, but in this case he felt he "couldn't be ruthless."

It is hard to ignore the contrast between the humane component that characterizes the inmates' experience and the rigidity of the jail personnel in general. Their comments have an unmistakable reactionary connotation; their main concern is the protection of a system that establishes the differences between good and evil, legal and unlawful, disciplined and unruly, without any reflection on the changes that take place in the prison. Their depiction of reality assumes a tone of superiority, as if the inmates were doomed irrespective of this new element of social interaction brought about by soccer.

The match between the inmates and guards offers another glimpse into this contrast. A guard authoritatively reminds us that he and the others are ready to suppress the inmates should the game degenerate into a conflict, but acknowledges that tensions lasted just a few seconds. The game in fact took place in a sportsmanlike atmosphere.

The same guard recognizes the effort made by the inmates to leave a sad past behind, to correct the wrong. However, he expresses reservations about their efforts from the standpoint of a fundamental mistrust of human nature.

Mario concludes with an enlightening, if familiar metaphor. It is not the wall around the prison that inflicts the worst damage: after all, it has doors. The real wall is the one inside the minds, the wall of prejudice and preconceived notions.

"Freedom is freedom, and that's not something to joke about," is Salvatore's final assessment of how the diversion created by soccer cannot possibly replace life outside. This statement is yet another reference to the real conditions of the prison system in Italy. The Opera prison is overcrowded. It is currently at 136 percent of capacity.

In Italy, according to the Ministry of Justice as of June 30, 2004, out of a total of 56,532 inmates detained in jails and psychiatric wards—that is 0.1 percent of the total Italian population—49,529 live in what the government describes as "irregular conditions." In 15 institutions across the country overcrowding exceeds 200 percent, with peaks above 280 percent, meaning that two inmates (in some cases almost three) share the confined space that was designed for one person.

A third of all inmates are remand prisoners who are awaiting trial or sentencing. This is a vulnerable layer of this population, as many of them experience detention for the first time and are particularly susceptible to the new condition, especially when sharing an overcrowded space. Many are immigrants who have committed crimes connected to extreme poverty. According to the recent Bossi-Fini law on immigration, if their immigration status is not legal, they are first forced to serve time and then deported.

According to a report by Maurizio Turco, counselor for the European Parliament on the rights of European Union inmates, Italy has the third highest prison density, with 133.9 percent, meaning that four inmates live in the space for three, after Hungary (159 percent) and Greece (156 percent).

These dry figures cannot possibly begin to describe the full dimensions of such a situation. Drug and sexual abuse, suicide, homicide and acts of violence are becoming more frequent as a direct result of overcrowding. It is no surprise that the introduction of soccer in the Opera prison had certain positive consequences.

The prison team eventually won the playoffs and was promoted to the second league championship. Next year the team will play outside the prison, although only inmates with minor felonies will be allowed to leave temporarily.

This documentary was shown for the first time in the Pisa penitentiary to an audience of 30 inmates. In its simplicity and modesty, it unveils issues of fundamental importance that go well beyond the scope of prison life. The movie reveals the inmates' level of life understanding, often surpassing that of the dominant culture of prejudice and demoralization, showing the need for a better understanding of the causes of crime, for an objective assessment of the punishment system and for a reorientation toward education and rehabilitation, all of which are incompatible with crisis-ridden capitalism.

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