

Allison Gooch

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Angela Dalle Vacche

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Facing Windows

In the past several years, European filmmakers have been questioning the very definition of the boundaries that divide identity, culture, race, gender, religion, and sexual preferences, among other matters. Many recent films also contain references to Europe's long and complicated history, both as a comparison to the present and a lesson for the future. Ferzan Ozpetek, a Turkish film director living in Italy, began his career by producing several films that address issues of homosexuality along with issues of relationships, gender, and secrecy. With the release of his 2003 film, "Facing Windows," which earned four David di Donatello Awards in Italy as well as international accord, Ozpetek took on a greater degree of subtlety along with a greater variety of cultural issues. In "Facing Windows," Ozpetek draws many fascinating parallels: thought versus action, desires and passions versus societal expectations, and memory versus reality.

One very interesting comparison in "Facing Windows" is the thin line between a character's considerations and his or her actual actions. This topic broadly relates to Italy's participation with the Nazis in World War II and Italy's corresponding sense of indifference and inaction. In fact, some sources site an

Italian desire to forget about the past – to erase all evidence and emotion concerning the Holocaust as well as general anti-Semitism and homophobia (Perra, 424). While it may be true that the current state of general acceptance of homosexuality and religion allows for an updated view of these issues and their past, it is a shame that post-WWII Italian culture has such a penchant for unawareness. “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing,” and “Facing Windows” shows the difference between dreaming of action and fulfilling it, no matter what the consequences may be.

Specifically, take into account the interwoven stories of both Giovanna and Davide. At first, it may be easy to see that Ozpetek is using Davide’s character to spur Giovanna into action to change her life for the better – “history and fate provide [Davide and Giovanna] with a chance to make a difference, either in their own ordinary lives or in the lives of others” (Sony Pictures). She seems at first unmotivated and lost in the perceived dreariness of her own life, endlessly searching for some passing pleasure that she thinks will make her life complete. According to the film, however, it may only be with the wisdom of age or the advice of friends that one may discover wholeness. Giovanna suffers from an inability to learn from the mistakes of the past – she is entirely unaware of the sufferings of the many Italians before her, and similarly does not know of their courage and strength. Giovanna’s self discovery takes place with the help of Davide. Starting at the beginning of the film, Davide seems to be confident in his actions and willing to make sacrifices to seek redemption from society. As his

memories begin to haunt him, grief sets in and he knows he has given up his chance at self-acceptance and fulfilling relationships with others (particularly, Simone). He takes up the distraction of creating a surreal sweetness in his life by devoting himself to pastry making – he cannot face his mistake until he nears the end of his life, and he uses the pastries as a way to escape the painful reality he experiences. Davide is constantly moved towards action, albeit sometimes reckless, while Giovanna suffers for her inaction. She works a job she dislikes, has married a man she constantly argues with, is not nurturing towards her children, and bakes her cakes and pies carelessly – the latter a fact which even her crude friend at the bar takes note of. Giovanna’s brief, near encounter with adultery is the lowest point of her weakness in the film. Luckily, her new knowledge of Davide’s story and her guilt over her social obligations as a wife and mother keep her from risking everything for love – ironically, the exact risk Davide wishes he had taken sixty years prior.

Another main theme in “Facing Windows” is the theme of desire and passion versus societal expectations. As we learn of Davide’s passion as well as his conflicting yearning to be accepted in society, we also see Giovanna test the proverbial waters of unfaithfulness and infatuation with another man. Based on Giovanna’s actions at the climax of the film, we can see that she has deeper emotional issues and an ingrained sense of responsibility that keep her from wandering astray from her family. Her motivations for her small fling with Lorenzo are fairly clear: she is bored, restless, and unhappy, so she turns to

transient “happiness” like sex and pastries in an attempt to improve her life. There is, of course, no moral issue with her making pastries as much as she pleases. She can make them in front of her family and friends, in the comfort of her own home. As soon as she steps outside this boundary by looking across into Lorenzo’s window, she enters a world of pleasures that she will not allow herself to indulge in. In fact, she seems to be unwilling to indulge in any particular thing in her life – Davide tells her “you’ve transformed your passion into a hobby.” This is the point where Giovanna really begins to turn her life around and to see the joys in the everyday things she already has.

“Facing Windows” also established various forms of love and infatuation. There is a romantic, whimsical love between Giovanna and Lorenzo, and a deeper version of this romantic love between Davide and Simone. Giovanna has a more aged, accepting type of love for her husband and children. Also, she and Davide form a friendly type of love, or almost a father-daughter relationship. Around the middle of the movie, during an argument between Filippo and Giovanna, Filippo mentions that Giovanna’s parents were or are presently absent. Davide is in himself almost a fatherly figure to Giovanna and a grandfather to her children – when he first eats soup with them, the children are very interested in following his lead when it comes to table manners. Also, Giovanna’s daughter forms the first bond with Davide by getting him to tell her “his name,” which of course, was actually “Simone.” The most insightful words about love, in fact, come from

Davide, who has had years to ponder what love might truly mean. His letter to Simone, which was written after Simone's death and where he requests forgiveness for his actions on that fateful night, also involves a lot of very vivid imagery and references to the relative blindness of himself and others. The fact that "Facing Windows" involves so many different types of love helps the viewer to accept even the most socially unmentionable types of love later in the movie.

Desire and passion versus societal expectations play a major role in the driving force of the movie: Davide's past and how it affects him in the present. While it may not be obvious to the first time viewer, nor is it apparent to Giovanna and Lorenzo until very late in the film, there are many hints pertaining to Davide's homosexuality dispersed throughout the movie. First, there is the strange view of Davide watching Giovanna and her family as they all sleep beside each other in the same bed – it seemed somehow foreign or perhaps sad to Davide. We later find out that Davide declared his love to Lorenzo, which was a very particular choice. If Davide had been in love with a woman, why would he have repeated his vows of affection to a man? Following this, he sits emotionless while Giovanna undresses him and helps him bathe, a strange testament to his lack of physical attraction to women. Also, as he dances with Giovanna, we see a flashback of him exchanging glances with another man, Simone. We later find that Davide made the decision to save the women and children in the area rather than saving Simone because of the persecution he experienced for being gay. This decision was a turning point in his

life, but he also “always wonder[s] what might have been if only a different choice had been made” (Sony Pictures).

Placing a homosexual, Jewish main character in the center of Rome, Italy has many implications, both in the setting of the movie and for a movie in the modern era. First, homosexuality in 1943 was still a taboo topic, and was little understood by the general population. Second, the heavy influence of the Roman Catholic Church upon that area of Italy dictated harsh judgment upon those who were not Roman Catholic and who did not follow their doctrines (Perra, 420, and Lichtner, 241). Catholics, of course, look upon homosexuality as a sin. Third, this was a time when Nazi Germany had their hold upon the Jews of Italy as well. In allowing the public to know of his religion and his sexuality, Davide placed himself in a very dangerous situation – hatred flows deep among those who refuse to accept the differences of others. In the context of the release of “Facing Windows” in 2003, and Ozpetek’s role as director, “[the] postmodern playfulness of gender and sexuality ultimately signifies how essentializing [sic] discourses of the past have been overcome” (Gelbin, 195). Ozpetek’s previous work all involved homosexual lead characters, but these films were apparently lacking in the subtlety that is required for the public to digest and accept a homosexual main character (Walters, 50).

Many people today still question the motivations and the lessons to be learned from the past, and this idea runs strongly through “Facing Windows.” It is fascinating to look at the various cultural attitudes that both instigated the racial

crisis of the Holocaust and allowed it to continue unhindered. Specifically, how could Italians, who claim to be generally good-natured, accepting, and innocent become both the victims and the perpetrators of the heinous crimes encountered in the Holocaust?

One motivation that "Facing Windows" briefly suggest is money and greed. The baker Davide works with mentions that many Jews still hold amounts of wealth around the city, so he agrees to be an accomplice in their impending round up and likely murder. Admittedly, no one deserves to be arrested, robbed, and imprisoned for no good reason, but the truth of the matter is, 85 percent of Italian Jews actually returned home from the concentration camps alive after the War was over (Lichtner, 241). But how can you account for the great amount of suffering that took place? How can we place value upon people's memories? In "Facing Windows," Davide's horrible memories of his regretful decision haunt him throughout the narrative, and we can see that his eventual hopelessness is a driving force in the present time period. He tells Giovanna,

I'm not afraid for myself. I can't do anything now. But you...you still have a choice. You can change, Giovanna. Don't be content to merely survive. You must demand to live in a better world... not just dream about it. I didn't do that.

Essentially, Davide used his knowledge and judgment in order to alert the others about the impending danger, risking the repercussions of turning against the established authority. Yet now he suffers for his loss, and shows how people who

survived the Holocaust, among the persecuted, persecutors, and the ignorant alike, are still torn between regrets from the past and how to change their own futures.

In fact, people often reach difficult times in their lives when they are made to question their own moral foundations. Consider the fact that while some people benefitted financially from persecution of the Jews, many people simply adopted hatred as an attitude because they were more worried about conforming to social standards than considering the real human truths before their eyes. “Facing Windows” really brings this question to light as we view the past and present Davide woven together into a visual tapestry of a man. Ozpetek poses Davide’s character as a picture of morals and innocence, which makes it hard for the viewer to imagine why anyone would discriminate against him. In regards to Davide’s homosexuality, Ozpetek chose to represent him in this way because, he says, “In the movies, I first saw something about the gay world in the John Huston film *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Not just that movie, but every one I saw after that with a gay character, I thought the movies weren't fair—the gay characters were bad. I'm trying to do something better” (Giltz). Perhaps there is some inborn evil that allows people to hate based only on the hatred of others, and not their own reasoning? We would like to think that perhaps, instead, the perceived power of authority caused most civilians to be too afraid to step up against these indignities. These, among many others, are questions still unanswered today, and Ozpetek attempts to bring these essential issues of humanity back to light in a new generation of movie goers.

Furthermore, the film as a whole requires the consideration of how Ozpetek approaches such a devastating historical memoir in the modern context. Ozpetek deftly suggests this interweaving of time and space between 1943 and 2003 by combining of memory and reality. Using modern film techniques and the advantages of digital effects, Ozpetek uses color, lighting and editing in a way that allows the viewer to experience the blending of memories and reality. In the opening of the film, which is presumably set in 1943 and not a flashback, there is an emphasis on darkness and shadows, reflecting the things people try to conceal. The murder scene is accented in following by a surreal blue light and Davide's creation of ripples in the water of the puddles – these suggest a disturbance in stillness, some action against the norm, and maybe even ripples in time. Soon after, we follow a fading of the bloody handprint which brings us smoothly into a time set sixty years later, which we also sense by the introduction of traffic noise, pedestrian chatter, and modern costumes and mise-en-scene.

Throughout the movie, we begin to see misplaced characters, sounds, and images that imply that we are no longer entirely immersed in a modern reality. Ozpetek again uses subtle changes in costume and lighting to hint to the viewer that these are figments of Davide's haunting memories. In fact, "Facing Windows" involves a certain degree of surrealism that is the product of Davide's memories and dreams, sometimes combined. Sometimes Davide has periods of lucidity that are stunning to both Giovanna and the viewer. For instance, when he suddenly expresses that he knows the secrets to baking perfect pastries, we are made to

wonder what types of things lie in Davide's past, and why they come to his mind when they do. After Davide declares his love to Lorenzo while Giovanna is in the pub, Lorenzo and Giovanna find him sitting listlessly by a monument. Soon after, they are chasing him through the streets of Rome as he seeks out the people of his memories. However, we get a sense of foreshadowing from a subtle clue in the sound of the movie – as Davide sits by the monument looking off into the distance, we begin to hear abstract sounds of a train and babies crying, which come from the night he ran to rescue the children. Later, the surrealism definitely plays a part as Davide breaks down in front of Giovanna after baking a multitude of pastries then declaring them to be imperfect. As he sits longingly behind his cakes after his memory relapse, he looks entirely forlorn and piteous, which will affect Giovanna for the rest of her life.

The idea of the window is a key element in "Facing Windows" that need not be ignored, as it suggests not only thoughts and desires but also reality and our perception of it. Just as it is impossible to tell who is the victim and who is the perpetrator, we cannot tell who is being watched and who is doing the watching at many points in the film (Lichtner 238). Ozpetek actually uses several interesting illusions: the material of the window itself to create reflections, views from both inside and outside, and the use of a window like object in key points throughout the movie to suggest both an increased awareness of what is there and a notion for what is hidden outside the frame. As a result, there is an implied duality in Giovanna's watching Lorenzo and his returned watching of her, both a matter of

apparent sexual voyeurism (Marcus 148-149). For instance, towards the beginning of the movie, Giovanna watches Lorenzo as he brings home another woman. There is clearly a divide between the two windows in his apartment that implies a superficiality and subjectivity of a frame, almost as if Giovanna is watching or creating her own soap opera. Soon after, as Giovanna argues with her husband, we see a reflection through the window of Lorenzo and his date interacting, which implies a notion of what Giovanna is really thinking about at that moment. In adding this subplot to the film, Ozpetek references the great Alfred Hitchcock's work, "Rear Window," which was classic for its use of windows, lenses, and other reflective mediums (Hennessy). Furthermore, Ozpetek uses the window as a visual metaphor while the characters are riding in vehicles and when the characters are feeling distanced from something. Both situations involve a sense of disconnect from other people, or a moment of deep thought and personal discovery. The viewer can see both the person or people involved in the scene and a reflection of what they are viewing – literally a window into his or her mind.

The window can also be viewed as a matter of perspective and mindset. Looking back into her own window from Lorenzo's apartment, Giovanna sees the exact type of growing love that Davide had earlier described to her. He mentions "it must be beautiful to see that love grow from a beginning that was only passion... to help it change, to protect it from the passage of time." Indeed, from a view opposite the one she holds from her kitchen, she can see the reality and the love that lie within her own life already (Marcus 151). Windows also offer an

inclination of perspective or a path created by Giovanna when we consider that “the real windows in the picture's title are the openings these two men have offered her—not a startlingly original idea, but warmly enhanced by the director and the cast” (Kaufmann 22). Towards the end of the film, we see Giovanna walk through the garden where Davide and Simone used to leave their love letters and ponder on the meaning of Davide’s influence and his memories. The last shot of the movie is an extreme close up of her eyes, or the “windows of her soul,” which show a replacement from physical windows and boundaries by a sense of higher self worth and purpose.

At the end of “Facing Windows” Giovanna thinks back on the lessons she has learned by allowing Davide to enter into her life. She says, “does everyone who leaves you always leave part of themselves with you? Is this the secret to having memories?” Throughout the movie, we witness as both Giovanna and Davide make steps towards personal fulfillment – Davide with only the ability to look back upon his life, and Giovanna with the ability to move forward. By weaving thought versus action, desires and passions versus societal expectations, and memory versus reality into a unified whole, Ferzan Ozpetek creates a deeply moving picture of both past and present and how they are delicately intertwined. He seeks to cross national boundaries to address the real issues of racism, persecution, and yet strength and hope, and “Facing Windows” does just that.

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