

# A Miraculous Materialism: Lines of Flight in *We Have a Pope* and *Corpo Celeste*

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## Abstract:

This article considers Nanni Moretti's *We Have a Pope* (*Habemus Papam*, 2011) and Alice Rohrwacher's *Corpo Celeste* (2011) via the notion of lines of flight as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. We argue that, in spite of stylistic and thematic differences, the two films present clear similarities since they highlight and address conflicts and tensions existing within the contemporary Catholic religious order. Both films present cracks and horizons of becoming within the institutionalised Catholic Church, tracing possible paths of transformation for viewers aligning with and following the two main characters. We argue, concurrently, that *Corpo Celeste* – because of specific formal and conceptual choices – engenders a complete reimagining of the transcendent realm within a miraculous or animist materialist and immanent paradigm.

**Keywords:** *Habemus Papam*; *We Have a Pope*; *Corpo Celeste*; lines of flight; Gilles Deleuze; Félix Guattari; Catholicism.

In times like these, escape is the only way to stay alive and  
to continue dreaming.  
Henri Laborit, *Éloge de la fuite* (1976)

This article addresses two Italian feature films, both released in 2011, focusing on the complex relationship between the single individual and

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institutionalised religion: Nanni Moretti's *We Have a Pope* (*Habemus Papam*) and Alice Rohrwacher's *Corpo Celeste*. Although both films can be categorised as expressions of contemporary Italian arthouse cinema, the former is associated with "one of the most outstanding figures in contemporary European and world cinema" (Mazierska and Rascaroli, 2004, p. 1), whereas the latter identifies the debut of a 29-year-old newcomer. The two films were both presented at the 64th Cannes Film Festival, albeit in different categories: *We Have a Pope* in the official competition, *Corpo Celeste* in the *Quinzane des réalisateurs*. Moretti's, in very brief terms, deals with Cardinal Melville's (Michel Piccoli) election to the papal throne, his mental breakdown and subsequent journey through the streets of Rome. While Melville eventually returns to the Vatican, he decides to step down from the assignment and renounce his role. Rohrwacher's film focuses on Marta (Yle Vianello), a 13-year-old girl preparing for her confirmation in a small parish on the outskirts of Reggio Calabria. Increasingly disillusioned with the generally apathetic, and, in some cases, outright cruel, behaviour of both her teachers and her peers, she runs away on the very day of the confirmation.

In spite of residing at the opposite ends of the Catholic spectrum in terms of importance – one a girl preparing for her confirmation at a modest parish in the south of Italy, the other the vicar of Christ on earth – Marta and Cardinal Melville embark on a similar journey, which sees them literally fleeing the Church before deciding to renounce their commitment to it. The two films' protagonists both refuse to confirm their belief in the Catholic Church vis-à-vis institutional structures, which, in spite of their widespread presence on Italian soil, appear to have lost their spiritual ascendancy and moral authority. However, instead of engaging in acts of direct opposition or organising an open conflict with the institutions of which they are a part, they opt for a literal running away and a figurative path of renunciation and detachment. While their flights occupy very different positions in the narrative composition of the two films – Melville runs away in the first half, Marta in the second – these movements nonetheless spark an inner transformation that culminates with the decision of a second, and definitive, physical subtraction from the sphere of religious power.

In this article we conceptualise Marta's refusal to confirm and Melville's renunciation of the papal throne as particular types of escapes, which do not simply reflect an individual renunciation or distrust of institutionalised roles and rituals. These breakaways constitute Deleuzo-Guattarian lines of flight and they open up two distinctive problematic political spaces through which Marta and Melville travel by constructing, in different ways and with varied results, new ethical and experiential

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possibilities. Despite the uncertain results of these escapes, particularly in the case of Melville, both films manage to present cracks and horizons of becoming within the institutionalised Catholic Church, tracing possible paths of transformation for viewers aligning with and following the two main characters. By breaking particular institutional borders, we will show how these rebellious movements – Marta’s flight, in particular – allow us to reconsider the distinction between the sacred and the profane, up to the point of turning mundane reality itself into a site of profound spiritual and ethical tension.

### **Lines of Flight**

The notion of lines of flight is surely one of the most fascinating and frequently-used concepts coming out from the analytical toolbox of the philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in particular from the elaboration of this analytical category carried out in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/2005). Central to their analysis of power relations, on the one hand, the line of flight can be connected with a path and process of liberation of desires, of becoming, and of “transformational multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 11) made available for individual experimentation. This literal movement, therefore, possesses a positive value since it clearly refers to the possibility for a person to renew themselves and, by doing so, to rediscover the world surrounding them.

However, this same concept does not indicate a simple escape to the outside of specific institutional deadlocks and cages since it evokes and relates to, in a broader sense, the entire definitions of systems of power, their reproduction, and, occasionally, their overturning. Indeed, the two philosophers argued that in order to understand how a state machine functions, it is not useful to focus, as traditional Marxists scholars did, on conflict and contradictions in a specific social system, or on its visible economic infrastructure. A social system, instead, is defined by the multiple and changing ways it manages or adapts to control its cracks and opening, its lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 90; p. 216). The strength of the capitalist social and institutional “State-Machine”, for instance, emerges from its continuous capacity to mutate and re-adapt, to remodel itself in accordance with flows of capital and information. At the same time, however, this continuous flow of deterritorialisation and flight, or transformation and loss of a certain structural stability, are associated with movements of reterritorialisation, or rather with institutional repositionings that allow and assure, in the case of capitalism, the persistence and reiteration of private capital accumulation (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, pp. 220–221).

Moreover, a line of flight per se does not necessarily constitute a revolutionary overturning of the order of things; it merely reveals the chaotic, transforming and dynamic nature of every existing being and social composition. Lines of flight can direct to fascist or self-destructive movements, and become lines of abolition, describing a suicidal mutation of the State-Machine, which openly seeks the death of its citizens and subjects, culminating in the emblematic case of the Nazi regime as the “crowning glory of the deaths of others” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 231). Other lines of flight only trace partial transformations, a movement that fails to trace a concrete overturning of particular structures and can, essentially, be easily brought back to order and reshaped, reterritorialised, as a new function, a new piece of a metamorphic structure. Nonetheless, it is through the mapping of lines of flight, and by embracing them that we find new modes of existing in the world, new assemblages that can lead to the creation of a new collectivity. This is a movement that does not have to rely on a dualistic opposition with a previous state of affairs but that implies the change and dismantling of the very governing dynamics on which specific organisations can establish themselves (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 298).

In this article, we employ Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of lines of flight as a set of trajectories to assess the power dynamics existing in the two diegetic worlds. We intend to observe these different lines of flight in their specific experiential and conceptual potentialities. For this reason, we are concerned with the lines of flight’s ability to grant entry into another territory, but also with their ability to reveal structural failures within power relations. Similarly, while the protagonists’ acts of refusal and escape could be considered not to be revolutionary per se or, at least, not in their totality, they nevertheless allow the audience to experience a major problematization of the institutions surrounding the two main characters. In *We Have a Pope* the line of flight highlights the issues that surround the person of the Pope, or rather, the Pope’s personification of God (cf. *The Young Pope* and *The New Pope* [Paolo Sorrentino, 2016; 2019]). In *Corpo Celeste*, Marta’s line of flight ultimately points towards an overturning of the logic of Christianity, suggesting the impossibility of separating the sacred from the profane. Consequently, we will also observe how this second case study offers a more profound and radical creative overturning of a particular power system.

### *We Have a Pope*

*We Have a Pope* was read in a very different light after the real-life resignation of Pope Benedict XVI (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) on 28 February 2013. The speech given by Ratzinger earlier the same

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month cited his advancing age and his declining strength as the reasons behind the decision (Benedict XVI, 2013). Nevertheless, Benedict's decision was met with shock and confusion within the Catholic world (Donadio, 2013). The only other precedent in history is Pope Celestine V, who was in office for five months before resigning in 1294 (O'Malley, 2010) – a gesture famously addressed by Dante Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy*, where he wrote: “the shadow of him who from cowardice (per vista) made the great refusal” (III, 58–60). However, others applauded the previous pontiff for his bravery. Among these are philosophers Massimo Cacciari, who sees the resignation as “an innovative gesture of great significance” (2013), and Giorgio Agamben, who has dedicated his book *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and The End of Days* (2013) to the topic. In it, he defines the pope's renunciation as “proof [...] of a courage that today takes on an exemplary sense and value” (2013, p. 1).

Ultimately, Ratzinger's decision cannot but call the role of the Catholic Church and its ministers in the contemporary world into question – something that the film's ending captures particularly well. As Melville addresses the crowd gathered in San Pietro, the atmosphere becomes increasingly sombre. After he pronounces his last words before leaving the balcony “Pray for me. I'm not the guide you need. It can't be me”, the camera alternates between focusing on the anguished looks of both the faithful and the cardinals, many of whom rest their faces in their hands in a gesture of desperation, and Melville's own apologetic yet resolute expression. Moretti chooses to accompany this very dramatic moment with Arvo Pärt's choral work *Miserere*, and in particular the verses from *Dies Irae*. A traditional Gregorian chant, whose words are based on the prophecy of Zephaniah 1:14–16, *Dies Irae* is a reflection upon the final judgment, as attested by the lyrics: “Dies irae, dies illa/Solvat saeculum in favilla:/ teste David cum Sybilla” (“Day of wrath, that day/ Will dissolve the earth into ashes/ As David and the Sibyl testify”) (Chase, 2003). The dramatic tension of the main character's refusal is a recurring affective and aesthetic pattern in the film, emphasised by the returning image of the empty balcony at San Pietro's Basilica or by Melville's initial desperate scream when asked to address the community of the faithful after his election as Pope.

However, the real conceptual and emotional rupture embodied by these images does not refer simply to the specificity of the narrative and dramatic arc, and to the implicit empathic participation of viewers in Melville's journey. This aesthetic composition connects more distinctively to a major crisis and the opening of a line of flight in the signifying value and hierarchical order embedded in these religious symbols and

institutions. As assessed during the film by several characters, the Pope is not merely a widely recognised moral and political authority, but “the first and last servant of God”, a simple person and Christ on Earth at the same time. Thus, this figure in its functions embodies some of the essential aspects and paradoxical foundations of Catholic religion, in particular the possibility to express in a visible and clear form the connection between the divine and earthly plane.

The Pope, therefore, is the vessel, chosen by God through the papal conclave, of this connection and, likewise, the guarantee of the continuation of the new testament inscribed in Christ’s sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> In the film, the empty balcony, as well as Melville’s refusal to accept the highest position in the Catholic structure, reveals the fragility of this structure and puts into question the solidity of the supposed connection between the Pope and divine authority. The tragedy of Melville, as Catherine Wheatley argues, is “that of a Christ that flees the cross” (2014, p. 19). Melville’s refusal, therefore, is radical and produces a crisis of sense, which, as the film progresses, affects all of the clerical structures. This is a rupture that, in many ways, can indicate a contemporary and critical reframing of the Christian faith in a sense that, as suggested by Jean-Luc Nancy, may contemplate the possibility of its own negation (2007, p. 140).

Critics (Grosoli, 2011; Zordan, 2013) have pointed how Moretti’s cardinal shares his surname with American writer Herman Melville, the author, among many other works, of the short story *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853), in which the eponymous protagonist refuses to comply with his boss’s requests by simply stating: “I would prefer not to”, an indirect negation puzzling and tormenting the people surrounding him in their attempt to understand its real secret meaning. In the case of *Bartleby*, this incomprehensible behaviour clearly opens a line of flight in the composition and organisation of the workplace, affirming a non-complicit but, at the same time, not directly conflictual attitude. This notorious line, indeed, conveys such an absurd and absolute denial that therefore puts into question any rational justification for the social and economic roles expected of any employee within a company or work environment.

However, while in both cases the refusal engenders a failure in power, we would argue that they are actually very different in their ethical implications and strength. Specific utterances aside (*Bartleby* says

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1. The dogma of Papal Infallibility, reflecting the direct connection of the pontifex with God, was defined during the First Vatican Council, which was held in Rome in 1869–1870 (Tanner, 2011, pp. 192–193).

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“I would prefer not to”, while Melville says, “I can’t do this”), what is most evident is the different ways the two characters deal with the prospect of existential transformations. Bartleby refuses to alter his behaviour, as he states: “I would prefer not to make any change” (2009, p. 42), while Melville does not resist change. Bartleby stays put – he says “I like to be stationary” (2009, p. 43) – and refuses to perform other activities beyond the ones specifically expected of him; Melville runs away. Bartleby refuses to bend until he is incarcerated and dies, Melville steps down revealing a personal and intimate impotence. Although it is arguable, following Wheatley, that Melville’s refusal presents liberating aspects, and, in particular, the open criticism and rejection of inauthentic and stifling religious hierarchies (Wheatley, 2014, p. 24), the individual nature of his act also reveals the limits of the line of flight it creates.

The conflict of Cardinal Melville with his religious function is presented as a psychoanalytic trauma. The first response of the Vatican council after the main character’s initial refusal, is to resort to the help of “the best psychoanalyst available” (Professor Brezzi played by Nanni Moretti), who is then succeeded in this role by his former wife – and second best analyst – played by Margherita Buy. The process of intimate and personal investigation allows us to engage with Melville’s failed aspiration of becoming a theatre actor, a career in which his sister had succeeded, and with his constant difficulty in making sense of his own decisions and choices. At the same time, Professor Brezzi has been confined within the Vatican walls and soon starts organising collective activities for the council, which, as the events unfold, become more and more akin to group therapy sessions. In the succession of games and small competitions we notice the cardinals and the high Vatican clergy finding momentary relief from their own suffering, anxieties, mental and spiritual pain, together with comic suggestions on the efficacy of psychotropic medication.

We could define this communal change in the emotional and conceptual trajectory of the film as a reterritorialisation of the individual crisis. If Melville’s incapacity to embody a sacred function opens up a crisis in the signifying and relational dynamics of power embedded in the Church, the film seems to focus on the limited nature of the people to which such higher roles are attributed. The cardinals and the Pope are, therefore, constructed as simple people having to take on extraordinary or even transcendent responsibilities. The purpose of the two analysts in the film is to provide a space for the negotiation of such absolute conflict.

This same tension finds a doubling and re-iteration in Melville’s encounter with a theatre company who are staging a production of

Anton Chekov's *The Seagull* in the same hotel he is using incognito after escaping the Vatican City. It is in this context that the main character encounters an actor (Dario Cantarelli) obsessed by the play up to the point of constantly falling into hallucinatory episodes during which he starts reciting every line and stage direction from the famous text. Cardinal Melville is initially complicit in the actor's delusion, enjoying an occasion to act again, however he gets reprimanded as soon as he stops acting along. The actor's absolute obsession with his role and the play is repeated in a later sequence in which we see the company finally performing *The Seagull* with Melville in the audience. The actor falls into another hallucinatory episode and starts playing all the roles as soon as his colleagues stop to help the cardinals and Swiss guards looking for the Pope. The inability of the character to break from his part and from the fictional world of the play operates as the absurd reversal of Melville's incapacity to embody his divinely and institutionally assigned role.

For both the Pope and the actor, just as for the cardinals undergoing collective therapy, there is an erasure of the personal and emotional lives of those who have to enact their assigned roles. The risk of uncritically embracing such roles is the incapacity of separating life, in its complexity and multiplicity, from these same functions that become, as in the case of the actor, all-encompassing and determining existential forces. On the other hand, the sense of inadequacy and powerlessness which arises from recognising the imbalance between the intimate human plane and the metaphysical one leads to the impossibility of accepting the "most sacred" of such roles.

Notwithstanding this critical element, the crisis in *We Have a Pope* would seem to be resolvable or at least manageable with a certain level of conscious introspection. An adequate therapeutic path could lead these wounded subjects to either accept their roles and functions, or as in the case of Melville, to step aside for others more prepared to accept such responsibilities. This same conceptual tension seems to find its counterpart in the stylistic composition of the film. Apart from the traumatic and enigmatic ruptures of the final sequences or of Melville's initial refusal charged with religious and metaphysical symbolism and anguish, the film is constructed as an intimate and psychological drama. It is characterised by the consistent use of balanced medium shots and medium close ups to follow characters' interactions and exchanges. Such choices and aesthetic devices seem to enact a stabilisation or reterritorialisation of the very shocks and traumas they depict, bringing Melville's crisis into a frame of more conciliating intelligibility. This conventional style seems to focus the viewer onto the impossibility for an individual to manage the sublime connection between the divine and

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human required by the Catholic order of things, epitomised in the contradictory space of the papal body.

### *Corpo Celeste*

*We Have a Pope* enacts a process of contradictory revelation. Although not necessarily staging a revolutionary flight, it emphasises the presence of ruptures within the Catholic order. *Corpo Celeste*, however, does not limit its ethical potentiality to the act of unmasking a contradiction. In this film we move to a micropolitical and peripheral perspective. The previous film enacts its line of flight by highlighting the cracks in its most essential structure. With *Corpo Celeste*, instead, the subjectivities presented are far from embodying such lofty contradictions. Notwithstanding this more marginal ground, the openings constructed by Marta's journey possess an extremely productive and affirmative ethical power moving beyond mere individual and intimate experience.

From the opening sequence, the ecology of the film demolishes any traditionally hieratic and sacred definition of the community of the faithful. We assist in the preparation of a public parade and mass in a parking lot and, at the same time, political advertisements, small circus-like attractions and a local orchestra blend together with what is supposed to be a sacred ceremony. In addition to this, the solemnity of the event is ironically disrupted initially by technical problems, by the late arrival of a bishop to the parade, and, at the end, by the ringing of the local priest's mobile telephone.

We perceive these same contradictions and contrasting elements in the character of Santa (Pasqualina Scuncia), the local parish housekeeper, who, apart from continuously demonstrating her devout religious beliefs, dedicates her life to the diligent organisation of particular church-related activities and to the spiritual preparation of the young people about to be confirmed. Nonetheless, these duties are not performed by resorting to austere procedures, but appear relatively modernised and secularised. As the teenage Marta (Yle Vianello) arrives in catechism class in the local parish, she is taken aback at seeing, in an otherwise pitch-dark room, the lesson presented in the style of television quiz show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" The possible answers to Santa's question, "Who makes up the Church?", include, "The Pope and priests", "Non-Europeans", "The People of God" and "The Plant World". In spite of Santa's hints, students select the first option. "Are you sure? Is this your final answer?" asks the teacher, before complaining about her pupils' lack of passion and engagement.

Similar situations are repeated throughout the narrative, emphasising the Church's penchant for performance and theatricality (Gharavi, 2012).

However, what *Corpo Celeste* seems to stress through these performances is rather the mediatisation of religion. By mediatisation here we mean “the social and cultural process through which a field or institution to some extent becomes dependent on the logic of the media” (Hjarvard, 2011, p.119). In the film, television culture has infiltrated Catholicism to the point that it not only informs its strategies and modes of expression but now also dictates its values. This desacralisation of catechism and ritual is enacted and reiterated over and over again in the film. In a later scene, the children are performing, quite laconically, the song “I’m tuning into God”. Written *ad hoc* for the confirmation, presumably by Santa herself, the lyrics are the perfect expression of trite evangelism that appears to underpin Catholic thought in this small community: “I’m tuning into God/he’s the right frequency/I’m the one tuning into God/and I’m doing so deliberately. I want to choose Jesus.” Even the local priest, who is invited to listen in, quickly excuses himself and makes an exit.

In yet another sequence, children are forced to re-enact the Gospel episode of Jesus healing a man born blind (John 9:1–12). They do so in a rather peculiar way: wearing a blindfold, they are left to stumble around the Church in order to experience what it might be like to be blind. Santa calls this exercise “The trial of those born blind.” Finally, and perhaps most significantly, on confirmation Sunday, a group of young girls execute a little dance routine to the song “*Il ballo della casalinga*” (“The Housewife’s Dance”).

The performance expresses a sexualisation of the female body together with an evident gendered construction of these young women as future housewives. The dance, however, does not seem to bother or trigger reactions in the parishioners. Albanese (2017) reads this episode as an example of the legacy of the Berlusconi era characterised by a strong objectification of women in television. Indeed, the sharp contrast between religion and the sexualised young women is something that is addressed repeatedly in the film. In another sequence, for instance, Marta is watching the news: the camera, displaying the young girl’s point of view, zooms in on a cross pendant hanging on the presenter’s plunging neckline.

The sharply ironic coexistence of these opposed elements, however, is not only a simple mockery and criticism of more secularised catechistic practices. In the film, this contrast operates as a persistent revelation of the loss of the centrality of these same rituals. Marta’s aunt describes the necessity to attend the confirmation lectures as an occasion to “make friends” and her uncle invites her to confirm as soon as possible in order to get rid of another worry. The confirmands do not show any interest in

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this landmark of Catholic life and the commitment it supposedly entails, shifting restlessly in their seats and giving monosyllabic answers, if any at all, to Santa's questions. Even Father Mario (Salvatore Cantalupo), the priest, appears to recoil at any form of deeper theological reflection. He struggles to focus on his preparatory readings, skimming over biblical passages and stopping to check his mobile; he impatiently attends the children's rehearsals, jumping at his first chance to leave; he doodles distractedly in catechism meetings.

When Marta asks him what one needs to do to be a good Catholic after being confirmed, he answers "Nothing." Then, he quickly amends himself: "Go to Church," but his reply has the quality of a distracted afterthought. Furthermore, he appears to be concerned exclusively with the possibility being transferred to a more prestigious parish. The contradictory aspects of this same secularised version of Catholic faith are also evident in the visible lack of empathy and charity expressed by the congregation, again in the persons of Marta's uncles as they talk with disgust about the possibility of eating fish from the Mediterranean Sea. They argue that because immigrants trying to reach Europe from Northern African have repeatedly drowned in those very waters in recent years, it would be safer to eat fish from the Ocean in order to avoid the risk of distressing cannibalistic experiences. This concern is not, hence, connected with pity and compassion, but with a sense of moral detachment from the refugees, perceived as foreign and alien bodies.

Despite a visible critical weakness and lack of clear moral, the strict and well-established authority of the Catholic Church remains untouched and unquestioned, as the answer of the confirmands, identifying the people of God with the clergy, demonstrates. We see this through the central administrative role that the Church embodies in the local community by managing rents, helping in the search for employment, and collaborating openly, as Father Mario does, with particular political figures inducing the congregation to vote for them. This same authority is revealed in the punishments and humiliations Marta, more than others, suffers either for questioning such authority or for simply asking questions and clarifications about obscure religious concepts.

One of the most dramatic moments sees Marta being tested on the strength of her religious beliefs and then slapped by Santa in front of the confirmands' class because she had the audacity to laugh after the teacher had tripped and fallen. Marta's enactment of a line of flight against these very closed top-down hierarchies, however, does not seem to demonstrate a clear conflictual stance or a pure rejection of the faith – we often see her praying alone- but is instead generated by a strong craving for an

alternative to everyday existence, for spaces and modes of living that do not coincide with Marta's actual experiences. The early signs of this desire to break from the conventional spaces of everyday life come from her observing a group of children living in an interstitial part of the city between the parish and the beach. This image is repeated on several occasions, often after religious classes or tense confrontations with her family.

A more radical attempt to reach this outside space is made during the day of the Confirmation. Initially, Marta escapes from the parish trying to save a few stray kittens, and then tries to cross the canal that separates her urban space from the feral children. The attempt fails and Marta has to go with Father Mario to collect a traditional wooden sculpture of the crucifix, which is to be used as a symbol of a new and more spectacular mode of celebrating the Confirmation. This short trip leads the two characters to the abandoned village of Roghudi, where Marta meets Father Lorenzo (Renato Carpentieri).

Marta asks the meaning of the famous Hebrew expression *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?* (the cry of dying Jesus, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"), an explanation denied in previous encounters with Santa and Father Mario. In contrast, Father Lorenzo presents her with an unusual picture of Christ, one opposed to the benevolent image emerging from Marta's prayers and classes. The solitary priest contrasts this conciliating transcendent figure with a vital and perturbing one: a furious and angry prophet, escaping from one place to the other, misunderstood and mocked by his own disciples, disgusted by the pettiness and selfishness of those around him and in a traumatic relationship with his own reality. As emphasised by the director Alice Rohrwacher (2011), Father Lorenzo's Jesus stands in sharp contrast to the syrupy illustrations of the catechism and moves closer, instead, to the restlessness and materially-felt wounds of Marta's own adolescence.

The encounter with the "furious" Jesus is, therefore, an occasion to put significantly into question the legitimacy of a canonical construction of faith and becomes also a decisive opportunity to open up the space for Marta's line of flight. We have seen how the Catholic Church of the film is composed of a secularised community recognising itself in mediatised and spectacularized rituals. Likewise, we have discussed how this same desacralisation of faith is combined with a hierarchical rule operated by ecclesiastical institutions, justifying their own existence in authoritarian terms. Father Mario's argument that the Church can become again a protagonist and a guide in present times of fear and uncertainty seems laughable, highlighting the complete incapacity for this institution to set up or figure a renewed and convincing moral path. Conversely, Marta

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seems to embody these same contradictions and to push them to radical consequences. The secularisation of religious experience leads to a disturbing difficulty in managing the separation between a sacred and transcendent dimension from the profane and mundane one. In her case, this conflict is connected with what we understand as a radical materialist desire to completely blend these two dimensions and to dismantle the borders and arbitrary existential divisions between different paradigms of experience, turning everyday reality into a problematic space of religious and spiritual enquiry.

One of the features of this line of flight can be observed in Marta's attraction to the animal world. Apart from saving the cat from Santa's capture, and her worry for the kittens being killed by a church helper, a key moment before this incident shows Marta finding and cuddling these very same kittens and having them climb all over her body. Her classmates laugh in disgust at her contact with "disease-spreading animals", a warning reiterated soon after by Santa. Marta's engagement with the animals recalls the famous iconographic image of St. Francis covered by birds, emphasising the sacredness and miraculous nature of all creation. The filmmaking style, featuring handheld camera movements – at the same level as the actors – and closely following the main character, with the camera often positioned behind Marta's head, also emphasises a textural and immanent relation with the story world.

This style even brings us to a distressing proximity and close affective and experiential connection with Marta, preventing us from "escaping the character" (Hesselberth, 2014, pp. 65–66). These stylistic choices engender a democratic and non-hierarchical way of approaching this film world and its ecology, allowing us to explore, map and experiment, with Marta, the reality surrounding her, further shattering the distinctions between a transcendent and materialist realm. Here we can detect a further opposition with the more classically ordered and intimate psychological portrait provided in *We Have a Pope*, where the formal equilibrium has the function of stabilising an affective and conceptual distress instead of underscoring its problematic dynamics.

In *Corpo Celeste* the immanent and spiritual dimensions collapse and blend together in one of the most intense moments of the film as Marta touches a sculpture of the crucified Jesus. The camera follows her careful caressing of the statue by cutting to details of her hands slowly moving at first over the beard and then feeling the wounds of the crucified body and removing the dust from it. The sequence lasts one minute and forty-one seconds and features only diegetic sound. The action is displayed as an intimate encounter and as a tender exploration of the suffering body of Christ, emphasising Marta's capacity to empathically and pragmatically

engage not just with the image of Christ, but with the entire world surrounding her. This scene presents a clear reversal of the title of the film, sometime rendered in English as “Heavenly Body”, and, more explicitly, of a concept presented earlier on by Santa. When having to describe the beauty and characteristics of the figurative crucifix to her class, she had rejected any possibility of comparing the sacred body to a human one: “Jesus’ body is different from ours, it is a spiritual body, heavenly, holy” and cannot be lowered to a vulgar material sphere.

Against this transcendent notion, therefore, Marta’s affective and material contact with the crucifix does not challenge the abstract spirituality of Christ but reintroduces it in palpable, immanent terms. If the film displays the disordered and unbalanced coexistence between the material and heavenly bodies of faith, as Ramsey McGlazer argues, for Marta, the “way out of the present impasse is immanent, available and fleshly, not at all ‘celestial’ in fact – or ‘celestial’ only if the heavens are brought definitively down to earth” (2017, p. 309).

Consequently, her final refusal to carry out the ritual of confirmation should not be examined as an open challenge to religion. This act of refusal stages the continuation of the line of flight opened by Marta, allowing her, in the very final sequence of the film, to eventually reach the beach where the children are playing and building a sort of new space made out of discarded material. The beach features the signs of a non-hierarchical ecology since the incomplete and re-used architectures composing it do not stage a stable and fixed cartography, but evoke a sense of openness and possibility. The sea, which, as Albanese has pointed out, was so far “conspicuously hidden within the landscape, barely visible through the concrete jungle and the dense haze” (2017, p. 231) composing Reggio’s ecology, finally emerges with its absence of boundaries that engenders and constructs a visual uncertainty.

Fiona Handyside observes that there are a number of characters, particularly in coming-of-age narratives, whose aimless journey ends at a beach: Antoine Doinel in *The 400 Blows* (*Les 400 Coups*, François Truffaut, 1959), Marcello in *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960), and the eponymous protagonist in *Ivan’s Childhood* (Andrey Tarkovsky, 1962). As she puts it, “Sometimes, the geographical marginality and liminality of the beach as the edge of nature is used to express the uncertainty of the protagonist, who often finishes the film at the shore, unsure of where to head next” (2014, p. 32). This is, however, clearly not the case for Marta. Earlier in the film, Marta’s mother had promised to take her to the beach, but only after the confirmation, and we often see her longing for this space. In the final sequences, however, the young woman takes matters into her own hands as she runs towards the sea in a strong display of

agency and self-determination that is, in turn, connected to the possibility of continuing her line of flight.

The beach is the place where Marta's embodied spiritual transformation is completed. It "offers possibilities of transcendence, difference and fluidity" (Handyside, 2014, p. 4) and carries with it a polyphonic symbolic and evocative power. The proximity to water conjures up images of regeneration and renewal that can be connected with Marta's crossing of the flooded underpass, echoing a materialist baptism. Furthermore, the beach, as both Shields (1991) and Fiske (2005) point out, can also be read as a locus of escape from normative behaviour, exemplified in an encounter with a proto-anarchic beach community. Rohrwacher herself positions this group outside of the logic of global capitalism and consumerist society: "They are collecting the stuff that people throw away but what they're making is a kind of mystery [...]. They use what society throws away to build something. Not to sell it or to put it on the market" (Ratner, 2011, p. 47). And it is in this rupture, envisaging the possibility and reality of a new and alternative social system, that we witness the conclusion of the film in a close up of Marta's hands holding a wounded lizard "miraculously", as one of the beach-kids says, still alive. This materialist miracle blends and integrates the profane and transcendent dimension and brings down divisions and boundaries.

### **Catholic Disorder**

In *We Have a Pope*, Melville's inadequacy, and his scandalous refusal of the papal throne, reveal the fractures within the institutional and symbolic structure of the Catholic order that resolve themselves in a personal and intimate journey. This process reconfigures and reterritorialises the metaphysical dilemma around the nature of the papal function and the connection between the sacred and profane, where the individual needs to be put into analysis to come to terms with her or his inability to embody such a monumental role. Thus, instead of disrupting the Catholic order and its hierarchies, the film reaffirms their necessity and solemnity while expressing a compassionate examination of the traumatic personal challenges involved in such institutional demands.

Marta's rebellious wanderings and her final crossing of the border, although not completely resolving contingent contradictions or setting a clear image of the future, produce a radical deterritorialization and re-imagining of the place of a spiritual dimension in a no longer transcendent world. Her path, by challenging the arbitrary division between the sacred and profane and embracing a tormented spiritual tension, destabilises the legitimacy of established institutions and interpretations of faith while putting forward a miraculous materialism.

This is a radical conceptual move that evokes a space for new collective and ethical assemblages. This spiritual reframing entails the possibility for an experiential ground capable of attributing existential value and moral dignity to the whole of reality, thus shattering dualistic distinctions and perceiving the bodies of the faithful as an expression of this complex ecology. To borrow a famous Deleuzian formula, Marta's line of flight expresses the need to believe again in this world (1997, p. 172) and to reconfigure the role of the believers within it and, thus, violate the suffocating boundaries humanity so desperately craves to build.

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