

Eccentric and Visionary, the Films of Carmelo Bene

N.L. (April 25, 2012)



Anthology Film Archives present, April 26-29, a retrospective encompassing all five feature films (as well as a couple shorts) directed by the vanguard filmmaker, actor, and playwright Carmelo Bene, one of the greatest figures in Italian avant-garde culture.

[The Italian Cultural Institute](#) [2] and [Anthology Film Archives](#) [3] are extremely proud to present Carmelo Bene: a Film Retrospective (April 26-29); including all five feature films (as well as a couple shorts) directed by the vanguard filmmaker, actor, and playwright Carmelo Bene, one of the greatest figures in Italian avant-garde culture.

Born in Campi Salentina, just north of Lecce, in 1937, "he made his debut in '59 with *Caligola* by Camus, directed by Alberto Ruggiero; however, the following year he offered a work entirely in the first person with *Spettacolo Majakovskij*, and background music by Bussotti. In the following decade, the great talent of the actor-director had the chance to fully unfold in



legendary shows: his virulent, aggressive and disrespectful - to the point of outrage - re-readings of Pinocchio by Collodi (1961), Shakespeare's Hamlet (1961), Edward II by Marlowe (1963), Salomè by Oscar Wilde (1964), Manon by Prévost (1964), Hamlet by Shakespeare-Laforgue (1967) caused a real uproar, and almost unanimous slating from the critics - except the discerning Ennio Flaiano - and shocked reactions from the public," writes.

Through his career Bene "succeeded in parodying the Italian histrionic acting tradition, as well as being its apotheosis. In the theater his model was Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, while the moderns he respected most in literature and painting were Joyce and Francis Bacon. In the cinema he had little sympathy for film-making after Buster Keaton and Eisenstein," John Francis Lane wrote in [The Guardian](#) [4].

The enfant terrible of Italian stage and screen, Bene turned his attention to film making for a brief period between 1968 and 1973, producing a small but unforgettable body of film works.

"The most notable of which was the first, based on his novel and play *Nostra Signora Dei Turchi* (Our Lady Of The Turks), inspired by his childhood memories of Otranto, the port south of Lecce. On stage, and also on screen, he created a phantasmagorical kaleidoscope of sound and color, expressing a nightmare vision of what happened in August 1480 when the Turkish fleet invaded Otranto and massacred 800 of the inhabitants. It was a remarkable example of avant-garde cinema, even if the Sight and Sound critic reported that 'it made no sense whatever,'" John Francis Lane continued.

His last three features are radical adaptations (or reworkings) of Hamlet, Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, and Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. All his films are visionary, flamboyant, wildly excessive, and definitely unrestrained.

"Though Bene's film is more Mediterranean and less cerebral, his closest parallel in cinema is Peter Greenaway. However, though its one homoerotic scene probably would not impress a gay audience, this and other Bene films could also figure well beside the works of Kenneth Anger or Derek Jarman, not to mention Pasolini (in whose *Oedipus Rex* of 1967 he played Creon)," John Francis Lane continued.

It's been decades since these works have been screened all together, making this an opportunity not to be missed. This retrospective has been organized in collaboration with the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia-Cineteca Nazionale. All films are in Italian with projected English subtitles.

Upcoming Screenings at the Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue New York, NY 10003

Capricci

1969, 89 minutes, 35mm.

"This is one of [Bene's] masterpieces. ... *Capricci* - melodramatic, wildly expressionist, and opaque - includes a bloody, endless fight between two men brandishing hammer and sickle, poisoned Christ paintings that kill the beholder, impotent sex by a lecherous old man coughing his lungs out over a tantalizing nude woman, killings, car crashes, explosions, and raging fires, all accompanied by operatic arias, constantly moving cameras, and violent montage. Vulgar black humor, eroticism, and anarchic action mingle in this swirl of color and incessant motion - a tour de force of expressionist filmmaking." -Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*.

Screened with:

Il barocco leccese (1968, 6 minutes, 35mm)



This is a short documentary on the Basilica di Santa Croce in Lecce. Bene is the narrator. He declared he shot it in order to get funding for his *Our Lady of the Turks*.

-Thursday, April 26 at 6:45 and Saturday, April 28 at 9:00.

Don Giovanni

1970, 75 minutes, 35mm.

"Although this *Don Giovanni* includes snippets of the music from Mozart's opera of the same name, the film is not a staging of the opera but rather a radical re-working of the *Don Juan* legend. After a prologue that alludes to the many conquests of *Don Juan*, the rest of the film concentrates on a peculiar kind of love triangle, in which the mother of a young girl competes with the Don for her daughter's attention. Bene's *Don Giovanni* could be considered a 'queer' film, mounting as it does a satiric attack on several of the institutions of modern sexuality: binary gender difference, the nuclear family, the machismo of male sexual prowess, and the Oedipal complex itself." - Harvard Film Archive.

-Thursday, April 26 at 9:15 and Saturday, April 28 at 7:00.

Salomé

1972, 76 minutes, 35mm.

Owes less to Oscar Wilde than to Bene's life-long infatuation with Italian pop art in all its gaudy excessiveness. All traces of 'reality' have been banished from this near-indescribable romp through Bene's cinematic universe. Highlighted by exuberantly tacky set design, eye-burning colors, and ever-changing illumination, in this film disorientation is the norm. This is certainly the only version of Wilde's text to feature a man nailing himself to a flashing neon cross, or in which the eponymous vixen literally peels the skin from the face of King Herod as an act of seduction, precipitating his - and the film's - final descent into utter madness.

-Friday, April 27 at 7:00 and Sunday, April 29 at 4:00.

One Hamlet Less

1973, 70 minutes, 35mm.

"Bene's version of *Hamlet* celebrates the power and beauty of Shakespeare's theatricality, while attempting to strip the piece of the morbid piety that has come to cling to it over the centuries. The film radically condenses most of the action of the play and further deforms the text: lines are repeated; original passages inserted; the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is not delivered by Hamlet but read - in an extremely abbreviated version - by Horatio; Polonius quotes Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. This film then is perhaps the best example of what Bene called his aesthetic/strategy of contestation. Bene also incorporates a critique of the play's sexual politics: the male characters sport elaborate and even ludicrous costumes, while the women wear outfits that reveal more than they cover." - Harvard Film Archive

Screened with:

Hermitage (1968, 24 minutes, 35mm)

Short film shot in the Hotel Hermitage in Rome. It was defined by Bene as a 'camera rehearsal,' a technical rehearsal for a forthcoming film *Our Lady of the Turks*. "The unrestrained body of Carmelo Bene transforms itself into a cinematic body with a series of performances (sleeping, dressing, writing, looking in the mirror), which lose all resemblance with reality."

-Friday, April 27 at 9:00 and Sunday, April 29 at 6:00.



Our Lady of the Turks

1968, 142 minutes, 16mm-to-35mm.

The film is presented here in a 142-minute version; newly restored by the Cineteca Nazionale from the original negatives, this version predates the shorter, 126-minute edit created for submission to the Mostra Internazionale del Cinema di Venezia in 1968.

Bene adapted his own novel for his debut feature, in which he stars as a writer possessed with visions by turns outrageous, violent, religious, and sexual. Stylistically baroque, disjunctive, and aggressively nonlinear, *Our Lady of the Turks* is a sui generis classic of absurdist cinema.

"With *Capricci*, this is the most hallucinatory and original masterpiece yet created by Bene; an explosion of neo-expressionism (with surrealist overtones) unequalled on the contemporary screen. ... [Alberto] Moravia refers to Bene's work as 'desecration by dissociation, pushed beyond the point of schizophrenic delirium' and to the over-all effect of this film as that of a grotesque, delirious lynching. How else [to] 'explain' scenes such as Bene, a knight in full armor, stubbornly attempting to make love to a nude woman (still involved with dishes) to the accompaniment of great clanking;... [or] driven insane perhaps by obsessions and visions, permitting himself to be raped by an eager Madonna who afterwards smokes in bed while reading magazines, halo in place." -Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*.

-Saturday, April 28 at 4:00 and Sunday, April 29 at 8:15.

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Links

[1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/22carmelo-bene-amleto1335379657jpg>

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