



"Marco Bertozzi", photo courtesy of Alessandra Chemollo.

Skyscraper Cinema

Marco Bertozzi, 15 January 2022

The Italian city of Rimini is not only a renowned seaside resort on the Adriatic Sea. It is also the home of a giant: a sixty-year-old skyscraper that stands out, completely alone, against an expanse of small houses. In this contribution, Marco Bertozzi reflects on the making of his film *Skyscraper Cinema* (2017), shot over the years as a resident of the high-rise. The result is a fascinating overview of the building's history and its ever-changing relationship with the city.

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I have lived in the Rimini high-rise for sixteen years now. Yet, the idea of making a film about it came to me almost immediately. I shot the very first frames in 2004, during my move-in: clips of a few minutes, later followed by footage of friendly encounters and tenant meetings, elevator breakdowns and (small) earthquakes, house parties and beautiful sunsets.

Images are everywhere, up in the high-rise. Even storms can be seen clearly, starting with the lightning striking the

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sea on the horizon. A procession of pitch-black and bright white clouds racing over agitated sands, with the wind hissing forcefully, to the point of shaking the fixtures with frightening gusts of air.

During these moments, one can barely walk in the square underneath. The signs sway, everything seems to be on the verge of being pulled upwards into the sky. I once spotted some men trying to free their car from the wintery snow, very far away. It looked like a monumental feat. Framing the scene was the ancient Tiberius Bridge and a bundle of frozen railway tracks that gave the impression of an abandoned North Pole station. From the opposite window, the beach was a steppe of blinding light, with a fake plastic palm tree bent by the snow, while scaffolders worked on precarious platforms in the distance.



“Skyscraper Cinema” still from the film.

I have always been fascinated by the way in which images affect us. Whether real or mental (although, aren't those also real?), images affect our perception, our behaviour. They orient our way of being in the world, the way in which we experience its space as we traverse its habitats. For me, the bond between images and places is an ancient one – a bond that I have explored since my thesis in architecture and then later in my doctorate on the urban imaginary in early cinema. Then again, in my post-doctoral research on space and architecture in Italian cinema.

However, when I consider my films – and I realise this only now as I write for Anima Loci – I see how they always happen to be reflections upon those ties between one or more biographies and a place. They are attempts to dig into that tangle of plural identities capable of defining the spirit of a city (*Rimini, Lampedusa, Italy*, 2004; *Roman Notes*, 2004; *Predappio in Luce*, 2008); highly symbolic sites (*Refugees in Cinecittà*, 2012); or even a particular home – the one in which I live (*Skyscraper Cinema*, 2017; *I woke up*, 2020).

What we tend to forget is that living in a high-rise is a cinematic experience in itself. The stories of the world outside

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unfold continuously, in high-definition, in Panavision, as you gaze at the almost infinite open space that lies beyond the glass panes. Yet, for those outside, the mystery lies in the strange entanglements of the tower's interiors and the hive of the people who live within them. They imagine who knows what: the house exists in the imagination even before its concreteness. The high-rise appears to be much more than a machine for inhabiting: it shifts, from time to time, from watchtower to spaceship; it is a compass, a needle, a monolith, a headstone, a state of limbo, a pointed finger. It is a border between heaven and earth, where other possibilities creep in.

This is perhaps why, since I was a little boy, I wanted to go into all those apartments, meet their inhabitants, to see the other children's toys, the small balconies, the mirrors. I wanted to sleep there and wake up to the light of the night and that of the morning, to hear the noise of the trains and the elevators. For me, the high-rise was an unreachable greasy pole, a device that acted as a capacitor for all the energy of Rimini – that amusement park city which seemed to promise perpetual vacation.



Teresa Chiauzzi and Giovanni Casadei in a still from the film.

One only has to look at the press from those years, or listen to the memoirs of the skyscraper's first inhabitants, to feel the *Dolce Vita* aura that surrounded the technologies of the new tower and its fantastical apartments, suspended high in the sky. "All the modern comforts... All the requirements for a hillside stay by the sea," a 1960s brochure proclaimed. "Air conditioning, panoramic windows, fast automatic elevators, Dalflex floors", all for the rich Milanese or for the bourgeoisie of Bologna. It condensed into its structure all those class and status symbols that were emerging through the novel, confident modernity of the nation. The helicopters that flew from Rimini to the Republic of San Marino, passing just a few meters over the skyscraper's roof three times a day, coronated this feeling of progress in the air.

What was happening outside was no less interesting. Singing contests, fashion shows, water-skiing for tourists, or care-free evenings animated by vocalists like Fred Buscaglione in the city dance-halls. Today, looking back, I believe that growing up in Rimini in those years, the sixties, was a thrilling experience, something that seemed to fulfill the desire for a particularly mundane fairy tale. After all, my elementary school was a hotel, the Hotel Olimpo. At the beginning of June all the desks were removed to make room for beds that would accommodate tourists.

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Those were the years in which a skyscraper for every city on the coast was envisaged, and in Rimini, the then-European holiday capital, there was even talk of a “city of skyscrapers”. We can glimpse this joyous frenzy in so many home movies: the workers waving from the rooftop of the just-completed skyscraper, or the Piper aircraft planes which passed by to advertise modern products with banners attached to their tails, turning their course around the roof of the giant.

We children used to look up, towards the skyscraper, waiting for that bonanza that a good wind would carry: lollipops, coupons for cheese and inflatable merchandise by brands like Pirelli. When released by the plane, the right wind would make the goodies fly over the heads of millions of children waiting on the tourist beaches and glide directly to us in the abandoned fields near the railway – the suburbia where the hotels of the new city still coexisted with the agricultural. All free, and directly from the sky, a legendary harvest that seemed to never end in which it was enough to bend down to gather the celestial fruits of another miracle, the one brought by the Italian economic boom.



Film still from the animation by Alessia Travaglino.

And yet that happiness, that blind faith in the future and that boundless will to live, stemmed from the violent wounds of the war. An exuberant life originated from an immense tragedy – almost 400 bombings, making Rimini one of the most destroyed Italian cities of the Second World War. A deep wound that never really healed, leading to the demolition of what had even remained intact (like the old Kursaal hotel). It is precisely on that wound, where the bombing had been the most fierce, that Veniero Accreman, the then-mayor of the PCI, decided to undertake the impossible task: a great challenge for what was left of the city, the creation of a skyscraper where previously there had been only craters, death, destruction.

I don't know if we can draw a metaphorical connection between the foundation of our skyscraper and modern Italy, the nation that emerged from the destruction war and soon came to think of itself as a modern country, the sixth or fifth world power. I know that the high-rise was created the same year as Fellini's *La dolce vita* and that in those years there seemed to be a crazy, almost shameless hope for everyone. It was that kind of feeling that takes hold of you, the thrill of living high up, detached from the ground. That same feeling, during these years, led Italy, and Italians, to believe in their modernity. It was as if this giant, along with the galaxy of its fortunate inhabitants, had become the

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symbol of a much larger emotional wave.

That “new world” tower – 100 meters high, designed by the Istrian architect Raoul Puhali as an icon of modernity – what was it turning into as years went by? While Rimini was becoming an international laboratory of mass vacation, its rationalist skyscraper struggled to come to terms with an increasingly hybrid history that had started to anthropologically redefine both this city as well as the entire country.

Thus, two decades are enough to turn the idea of a “classy place” into its opposite: from technological paradise to “eco-monster”; from being a model of social cohabitation to a catalyst of fear and catastrophic allusion. The decadence of the skyscraper becomes associated with underworld activity, with murky prostitution trafficking, as aptly described by Valerio Zurlini in the cult film *Indian Summer* (1972), where the most eligible bachelors turn it into the *locus amoenus* for layabout libertines.

The price of the apartments goes down and the first foreigners arrive, often with precarious jobs. By the eighties and nineties, no one in Rimini wants to live in the high-rise anymore: its imaginary is now marked by negative values, supported by concerns regarding the structure itself – “I think it’s going to collapse”, “he says the pillars don’t hold up anymore”, “when it’s windy it seems as though it’s about to fall down” – as well as some mistakes in the management the tower of almost 200 apartments.

The list of complaints is endless and the crowded tenant meetings only end up with the problems being restated: faulty elevators, heating that doesn’t heat, exploding pipes, unexplained electrical failures, disputes over parking spaces, bags thrown from the upper floors onto the first-floor terraces, stagnant air in the hallways that won’t go away... The administrator fleeing to Latin America with the money for the new lifts, and finally, the attack on the twin towers on September 11, 2001, are the final blow for the skyscraper.



Chinese lesson, with Raffaella Vaccari, Lisa Giulianelli and teacher Chen Yi.

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Then, the downward spiral started to change its course, albeit slowly. Today, a heterogeneous humanity lives in the high-rise: the last census reports that we are of 17 different nationalities but nobody really knows how many of us live here. In the last few years, young precarious cognitive workers have arrived – graphic designers, editors, musicians, filmmakers... many couples with children: they don't have to spend that mountain of money that a small house usually requires in our absurd real estate market.

Here, apartments cost half as much as in the surrounding area and you are always near the station and the canal harbour, the Malatesta Temple, and Fellini's Grand Hotel. As such, the skyscraper is imbued with echoes of a shared social imaginary. The many languages that can be heard on the landings increasingly recall the tower of Babel, marking each level as a rejection or exaltation, condemnation or curiosity, shame or carefree daydreaming.

It is a high-rise that lies at the frontier of continents; a flying, colorful, hippie, indie, hybrid skyscraper. Its corridors are today traversed by the people of contemporary Italy. Thanks to new forms of solidarity, they have resisted through the crisis and loneliness imposed by the pandemic. It is a novel condition, that forces introspection.

A few years ago, for the fiftieth anniversary of the skyscraper, we organised a big party. There were a thousand people there to visit the exhibition of the original architectural plans; to listen to the inhabitant-musicians united through the *Skyscraper Orchestra*; to watch home movies from the sixties, accompanied by food from around the world; to listen to the memories of citizens who had to, willingly or unwillingly, come to terms with the reality of this building.

The late former mayor, Veniero Accreman, also came to remind us of the skyscraper's origins: a "historic architectural compromise" that would give work to hundreds of families for three years, a flying council house, turned upwards, towards Europe. An important moment of celebration – the end of the film? Its beginning? – between pieces of enduring memory, a present moment in continuous vertiginous mutation, the future of a city that still wants to be alive and kicking.

How to express all this in a film? How does one explore the connection between the tower and Rimini, the web of relations that constitute it, the life of the skyscraper in its most subtle moments? The collective fears of those who live up high, dreading a vertiginous collapse, a devastating fire, a final flooding from the rising sea? Perhaps the ribbon windows, in their continuous succession, already refer to the frames of the film, to the idea of a natural cinema.

It is not easy to go beyond the surface of the world. I don't believe in the sirens of easy realism. Rather, I think it is important to strike at the heart of reality in order to reveal its most problematic and hidden points. One has to conduct a reconnaissance of the invisible, balance opposing needs, find a path between documentary and fiction, testimony and imagination.

After all, the whole point of making documentaries is to be open to the unknown, in order for your work to not spring only from a predefined idea. The beauty of a sequence often lies in welcoming what emerges spontaneously during, after, and around what you had to foresee – a cinema capable of dealing with vulnerable spaces and experiences. A "performance cinema" where subterranean dimensions can emerge as traces of an unexpected story.

Here lies the opportunity to play with form, through the dramaturgical possibilities of the reenactment, through the animations by Alessia Travaglino, the editing done along with Ilaria Fraioli, with whom I spent a few months "digging", not only in iconographic terms but also in the underground labyrinths of the idea of inhabiting. For this reason, *Cinema Grattacielo* also uses multiple archival materials and the different qualities of the images constitute an autonomous narrative thread.

The film shows the slow mode of production as well as all the technological changes that have taken place behind it: historical material shot in diverse ways, footage made with MiniDV or DvCam cameras and cassettes, some

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parts in Betacam, others in HD or with GoPro cameras. The multitude of textures seeks to express a multiplicity of perspectives, of possible dialogues between the filmmaker, the inhabitants, and the building itself. So much so, a double autobiographical reflection unfolded in the dialogue between one of the high-rise inhabitants – me – and the building itself, here voiced by writer Ermanno Cavazzoni, screenwriter of *La voce della luna*, Federico Fellini's last film.¹



"Astronaut" Marco Bertozzi, still from the film.

It is an architecture that speaks, that tells us how it feels, its discomfort, its desires, its relationship with the communities that inhabit it: "Look here, do I look normal to you? No, not really... as I feel like a terrible son... come on... after all... I'm an oddity, raised with slaps and rebar, shouting and electric cables, lightning and concrete fumes. Here I am! In a city of low houses, three floors at most, everyone looks at me suspiciously and I can't hide, I can't turn away. I'm obsessed, they see me everywhere... I can't hide."

About the author

Marco Bertozzi is a filmmaker who contributed to the rebirth of the Italian documentary film with a strong commitment to theory and cultural promotion. He has taught Documentary Cinema in Rome, Lugano, Quebec and, currently, at IUAV in Venice. His books constitute important historical-theoretical reflections for a renewed approach to documentary cinema and have been adopted in several film schools and university courses. He has worked as a film curator for exhibitions on Italian cinema, was part of the team that designed the Fellini Museum in Rimini, and was the director of *Corto Reale. Gli anni del documentario italiano*, a 27-part programme for the national TV station, RAI Storia.

Footnotes & references

[1] The voice of the skyscraper, enchantingly interpreted by Cavazzoni, refers to the many friends who contributed to making the film, inside and outside of the tower, starting with the residents, with whom we also staged the theatrical performance FLATS: Scenes of extraordinary daily life in the Rimini skyscraper, to launch the crowdfunding of the film about the Rimini skyscraper. Directed by Giovanni Casadei, an actor and director as well as resident of the skyscraper, the performance was an intense hybrid of theatre and cinema, in which around 20 inhabitants staged their experiences in the communal house in May 2015. It was a kind of documentary theatre, a sort of autobiographical drama in which people from a wide variety of backgrounds agreed to represent the original vertical community they belonged to.