

*Totó.*

By Peter Schreiner.

Echtzeitfilm, 2009.

128 minutes. DVD format, black and white.

Peter Schreiner's *Totó* (2009) is an unusually oblique and challenging experimental documentary film. In fact, without reading the press kit, reviews, or interviews with the director, it is practically impossible to figure out what is going on. But, with the help of secondary sources and after watching it for a second time, while freeze-framing certain images and rewinding and re-viewing scenes over and over again, I began to better understand the director's purpose and the point of the film. This movie even caused me to return to André Bazin's influential question: "What is cinema?" Because *Totó* did not seem to fit any of the usual patterns of construction, narrative, or codes that have evolved over more than a century—even for the experimental or avant-garde cinema—I felt I had to conduct some research. Only then did I have my "Eureka!" moment as I gathered information about Totó, the main "character," and the movie's locations.

Most of the information I learned is not contained in the film itself. However, further research finally enabled me to figure out what was happening on screen and thereby better appreciate other aspects of the movie, including its marvelous cinematic qualities. For instance, my research sources enabled me to discover Totó's occupation (which is not disclosed explicitly in the film), and to ascertain more about his family life (which is not divulged explicitly *or* implicitly), his intermittent and ruminating voice-over narration, the film's style, and the Austrian filmmaker Peter Schreiner.

The film's protagonist, nicknamed Totó, is a real-life person named Antonio Cotroneo. He is not an actor; thus, despite its unusual form and content, the film can claim to be a documentary. At the beginning, Totó is living in Vienna with his Austrian wife (of thirty years) and their four sons. (None of this information comes from the film but is crucial to understanding it.) Totó appears to work at Vienna's famed Konzerthaus, and we frequently cut back to him hanging around the marbled halls and lobby of that music hall. What does he do at the Konzerthaus? My best guess is that he is a guard or an usher, since at one point we see him handing out programs. Other critics have guessed that he is a composer, conductor, musician, music student, or patron. Some believe he is a poet or novelist; one even says that he is a political science graduate student working his way through school.

Totó was born and raised in the southern Italian coastal town of Tropea (in Calabria's Vibo Valentia province), a famous bathing spot, situated on a reef in the Gulf of St. Euphemia; it is connected to the mainland by a narrow strip in the Tyrrhenian Sea. But Totó left Italy in his youth. Now, at age fifty, he finds himself caught between two worlds. His journey (or journeys—it is not clear how often he takes the train to Tropea) back home represents most of what we see and hear on screen. Some of this information comes out in poems and random thoughts in the language of his childhood, the dialect of Tropea. His musings evoke not only memories of and nostalgic yearnings for his lost "simple life" but also feelings of homesickness he thought were long behind him. So, in search of himself, he takes a train back home,

to Tropea and its “Borgo,” the road of his childhood, where stone steps lead down to the beach and the sea, which seem to represent freedom.

Schreiner, who photographed, edited, and designed the sound for the film, is primarily interested in the Calabrian coastal village with its derelict homes, weather-beaten cliffs, lovely beach, foreign tourists, and Totó’s intriguing old friends. The protagonist’s life in Vienna remains largely out of sight. The main subject is, after all, Totó’s quest for what he really yearns for in life. And that search explains some of the experimental techniques that Schreiner uses. Thus, the fragmentary scenes, which cut from one location to another, seemingly without regard to logic or continuity, may represent Totó’s fragmentary thoughts, feelings, and emotions; the beautifully detailed, albeit unsymmetrical, tightly framed, extreme close-ups might represent Totó’s focus on himself (as well as the filmmaker’s intense focus on Totó); and the poetic black-and-white imagery could signify the sharp distinctions in Totó’s mind and heart between Austria and Italy, as well as the “black-and-white” struggles within his soul. Indeed, the churning sea and portentous sky in Tropea often externalize Totó’s inner turmoil. Similarly, the shadows of a fence over Totó’s weather-beaten face seem to trap him in his Italian past.

On first viewing, *Totó* appears not to contain a narrative, in the common-sense use of that term. Indeed, plot is a mostly meaningless term in all of Schreiner’s films, especially his documentaries *Bellavista* (2006) and *Die Zimbert* (1991); rather, sensation comes before sense, and experience takes precedence over story. One also notices meticulously composed, albeit decentered, compositions throughout *Totó*, frames in which the people are mostly at the very edge of the screen. Many of these images are beautiful, although they seem not to emphasize the human beings, preferring instead to show the relationship between people and their environments. Actually, many shots in *Totó* contain no human beings at all. For Schreiner, “a shot is like a stage that you can enter and exit from” (Huber 2010).



*The shadows of the fence over Totó’s face seem to trap him in his Italian past.*

Moreover, in contrast to the many wide shots of landscapes, panoramic seascapes, and townscapes, there are numerous extremely disorienting tight close-ups, especially of Totó's deep-black, continually roaming eyes; his ears; bushy eyebrows; protruding lower lip; and hair, as well as the pores and wrinkles on his world-weary face. A careful spectator will notice that the camera never pans or tilts, not even once; it only moves when it is stationed in a train compartment, but it is still locked down on a tripod. There are, of course, no handheld camera movements, the epitome (and default position) of contemporary documentary style. There is also no background music, although there is some live music and singing from time to time. Schreiner's austere aesthetic patiently accumulates cinematic fragments that illuminate both Totó and Tropea, so that by the end we feel intimately acquainted with both – while also recognizing that certain inaccessible and ambiguous depths must always lie beyond our ken.

Many shots are held longer than necessary for their narrative function, an editing technique also used by earlier fiction filmmakers such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and the French New Wave directors. In *Totó*, these long takes enable us to scan the image and reflect on the situation, rather than just rushing on to the next plot point or some action-movie-style cut. It also enables us to study the subtle effects of the environment on Totó's psyche. The message seems to be that dead time is a major part of Totó's life, and ours. After all, the pace of life is not the same as the pace of movies, and *Totó* is a film of contemplation. Time seems to come to a halt.

According to Schreiner, "You can't chase after things. You have to let them become. You have to be long enough in a place for something lasting to emerge, even with the most banal things. It takes time. And it will be beautiful, if you take the time." He tries "to let things happen, not watch them, which may be a provocation: as a filmmaker you seem doomed to watch. But you have to mobilize all mental strength to adjust your attitude to escape watching, to be able to approach the other and dive into him" (Huber 2010).

New digital cameras allowed Schreiner to shoot about 160 hours for *Totó* – and also made it easier to organize and edit that footage. The director likened the editing process to "sculpting, with the carving away getting more difficult and painful with each subsequent edit: But you also feel a structure growing, the creation of something new, and that is one of the most beautiful experiences there is" (Huber 2010). However, that editing may not be in strict chronology.

"Making films," says Peter Schreiner, "is a means of talking. Maybe even a substitute for talking. I've always had – and still do – a problem with the imprecision of language" (Huber 2010). Thus, much remains unsaid in Totó's conversations and reminiscences, which are mainly spoken to the director, who is the off-screen, unheard interviewer. (I originally thought that much of the talking was Totó's interior monologue.) In fact, Schreiner removed himself from the last two scenes only in the final cut. Although Schreiner is off-screen and unheard, his presence is still keenly felt – but only if you suspect or come to learn that Totó is talking to an interviewer, not to himself.

Ultimately, language is inadequate to fully comprehend Totó's situation. The subtle soundtrack involves dialog, sound effects, and even exaggerated breathing, sighs, and groans, as if Totó were carrying a heavy burden. All this requires the viewer-listener to be alert and attentive to nuance. Schreiner's frugal framing and sensuous soundtrack