

*Io sono Li.*

By Andrea Segre.

Jolefilm Production and Afternam Films, 2011.

96 minutes. DVD format, color.

Andrea Segre's *Io sono Li* (literally "I am Li," but released in English as *Shun Li and the Poet*) went directly from the 2011 Venice Film Festival to the Cinema Farnese in Rome's Campo dei Fiori. The film is billed as Segre's first work of fiction, a label I would reject because I believe it denies the work's value as social commentary. He is best known for a number of impactful documentaries that directly address issues surrounding Italy's troubled relationship with immigration. *A sud di Lampedusa* (South of Lampedusa, 2006), *Come un uomo sulla terra* (Like a man on Earth, 2008), *Il sangue verde* (Green blood, 2010), and *Mare chiuso* (Restricted sea, 2012) all have as their focus immigration to Italy. In particular, these films ask questions regarding the place of immigrants within a national historical narrative that has itself been defined by emigration for over 150 years. As such, and given the fact that Italians have not rigorously addressed their own history of emigration, Segre's oeuvre contributes to opening a dialog. Again and again, he effectively faces the contemporary situation of immigration to Italy, overlaid on the unstated backdrop of Italy's diasporas, leaving it up to his viewers to connect the two histories.

Those who regard documentary films as inferior to feature films might view Segre's *Io sono Li* as a maturing of sorts, as an opportunity to express himself in the "real" medium of cinema. However, to suggest such a thing would, in effect, dismiss and deny his documentaries their rightful place as engaged cinema and diminish the worth of their intent and impact. As demonstrated by the success of *Mare chiuso*, his previous film, Segre has by no means abandoned documentary for a more commercially viable venue. Instead, I would suggest that his foray into feature film evidences many traits of documentary work, something akin to Vittorio De Seta's movement between the Direct Cinema style of his short documentaries of the late 1950s, such as *Parabola d'oro* (Golden parable, 1955) and *Contadini del mare* (Peasants of the sea, 1956), and his feature-length films, such as *Banditi a Orgosolo* (Bandits of Orgosolo, 1961) and *Lettere dal Sahara* (Letters from the Sahara, 2006). Rather than fiction, I would categorize *Io sono Li* as a nonfiction film, a term that better suggests a continuation of the thematic arc of Segre's documentaries with a slight recombination through which to express different insights.

The cast of *Io sono Li* includes Zhao Tao—winner of the 2012 David di Donatello Best Actress award for her role as Shun Li—Rade Sherbedgia as Bepi, Marco Paolini as Coppe, Giuseppe Battiston as Devis, and Wang Yuan as Lian. The story centers around Shun Li, who works in a textile plant on the outskirts of Rome. She is working off a debt to her Chinese sponsors, who will enable her to receive the legal documents needed to bring her eight-year-old son to Italy. Without warning, her Chinese sponsors send Li to Chioggia, a small island city south of Venice, where she is to manage a bar-restaurant frequented by some of the town's locals: fishermen, retirees, petty criminals.

Bepi is one of the regulars at the establishment, an older Slav fisherman known to all as "the poet" for his habit of referring to each day's events in rhyme. He is widowed and unwilling to give up fishing and move to a more sedentary life off the island, despite his son's urgings. Bepi soon strikes up a friendship with Li through poetry,

and it is this celebration of a creative engagement with the world that helps them both relieve their solitude as expatriates. Bepi's long residence as a refugee from war-torn Yugoslavia has resulted in a fairly well-integrated life in Italy: He married an Italian, found a place among the community of fishermen, and has a caring son who wishes to see him work less and age more comfortably. But it is his experience as a foreigner in Italy that gives him insight into Li's life and helps bring to the surface some of the young woman's feelings, struggles, and hopes. Bepi and Li are mirror images of each other, whose existence within a social context not their own displaces them not only in space but in time. That is to say, Bepi's decades-long residence in Italy has gained him only a superficial integration. The depths of his otherness are fully brought to the surface when his interactions with Li lead to suggestions of his own nonbelonging.

Some of the leitmotifs threaded throughout the film effectively link disparate cultures. The uniqueness of each culture finds meaning through the metaphorical language of poetry or poetic existence. The most effective of these leitmotifs is the one that opens the film. As Shun Li and another woman are lighting floating lanterns to celebrate the poet Qu Yuan (340–278 BCE), the frame is filled by Li's face, the lanterns, and the softly moving water. Li's soothing voice recites some of the poet's verses as the equally soothing reddish light of the lanterns casts its glow in the dark. The serenity of this moment is broken by a man abruptly walking into the room and turning on the light. The magical moment of poetry is shattered as the setting is revealed to be a bathroom; the softly moving water is in a bathtub. The man proceeds to curse at the women for their "stupidity" and walks to the toilet bowl to relieve himself. This type of exchange also becomes a leitmotif in that there will be other moments of kindness, compassion, friendship, and attempted communication that will be shattered by gruff, unthinking men. And yet, these violent interferences become a clear illustration that location, cultural differences, or the unkind behavior of some cannot destroy the potential magic of human relations.

In keeping with the lyrical tone of the film, the very name *Shun Li* suggests a wonderfully poetic play between the main character and her presence in the landscape. Since *I am Li* could also be (mis)read by Italian speakers as *I am there*, it stands as the silent declaration of an individual, a woman, who is rendered almost completely invisible by both her co-nationals and Italians. Adding even greater depth to the title is the fact that the word *Li* includes in its range of meanings "to stand, to exist." The film is sometimes distracted by its own elaboration of a sort of female essentialism and to some degree, orientalism, which aside from a few examples leads to the almost complete relegation of Chinese males to the lowest forms of human behavior (Italian males do not fare much better and are equally unredeemable). As an intelligent filmmaker who makes the most of his actors, landscapes, and frames, Segre handles delicate issues extremely well so as to bring to light some of the painful and complex realities of immigration; while not explicitly, he suggests parallels between this film's scenario and Italian emigration.

Segre delves into the system of exploitation whereby Li and other Chinese women are taken advantage of by their own (we can assume that this exploitation is not gender specific, but in this film we are privy only to its effect on women). Individuals are held almost as slaves, generating revenue in any number of ways, held in check by their countrymen's promise of eventual freedom in Italy. In the case of Li and other women,

the promise is of an eventual reunion with their children or other loved ones. The “contracts” are shown to be the worst type of exploitation, as women work long hours, day in and day out, to pay off their “debt” to their bosses or those who have made their (most likely illegal) entrance into the host country possible.

At the same time, the director sheds light on the frustrations of an Italian population struggling to deal with high unemployment, an ever-increasing cost of living, and a changing economic culture that continues to outsource, to erase traditional occupations, and to displace workers with poorly paid immigrant labor. Unfortunately, the hardships that have befallen the local population make it hard for them to sympathize with the plight of the new immigrants, who are merely seen as the cause of their problems. Chioggia as a location is particularly interesting for its historical ties to the powerful Venetian Republic and for that republic’s historical ties with China, which brought it great benefits and wealth. This contemporary expression of xenophobia therefore directly contradicts past interactions between the two cultures, beginning with Marco Polo and extending for centuries afterward.

The film does, however, have its kinder, more human side and what might be considered a somewhat cautiously happy ending. Much of this gentler aspect is due to the friendship that Shun Li finds in Bepi and in her Chinese roommate Lian. Both represent a dangerous transgression of the defensive limits set by both sides—dangerous for the potentially disruptive power that human relations have in proposing alternatives to the controlling hold under which each individual is made to function.

Friendship is a transgression that neither side can seem to tolerate for the openings and communicative opportunities that it provides; as a result, relationships are soon threatened with physical and coercive violence. Such impositions result in a deeper isolation for Li as a lone woman, and a painful reminder that Bepi remains, at some level, a foreign body among the Italians. Nevertheless, Li, Bepi, and Lian (no less important as a peripheral actor for her immensely impertinent act of resistance) will, as the film moves toward a conclusion, act in a way that sutures the wounds of imposed isolation with a poetic activism of mutual aid and recognition.

The film’s conclusion effectively braids the leitmotif threads through the image of floating lanterns. The closing scenes blend together the lanterns and Bepi’s fishing shack in a final homage to the poet Qu Yuan and Bepi the fisherman/poet. Throughout the film, the constant presence of water is an element that provides the opportunity for movement and escape from the rootedness of land. Like Venice, Chioggia is at the mercy of the rise and fall of tides that flood parts of the city and invade people’s everyday lives. This phenomenon of *acqua alta* (high waters) blurs the distinction between *terra ferma* and the sea, a reality that further underscores the beckoning to freedom from the restrictions of conventions. The scenes shot during high waters become fundamental in understanding the ambiguous stance of the region’s inhabitants living a precariously perched existence—an existence that has become more vulnerable as a result of their displacement and loss of livelihood due to a bad economy, a drop in fish resources, and the effects of global industrialization. Again, Chioggia is doubly important as a location because it stands in contrast to its more aristocratic and powerful neighbor Venice, which in turn suggests a past of maritime glory and a long-standing relationship with Asia.

Andrea Segre’s *Io sono Li* beautifully pays homage to the poetry of life and human relations without overlooking the painful aspects of the contradictions inherent in

migration: exploitation, prejudice, and fear. It is a touching and important work of fiction by an engaged filmmaker whose films take the medium well beyond its assumed limits, thus meriting greater distribution and attention. The place of documentaries cannot be usurped as a means of social expression and the recounting of marginalized histories, just as the term *fiction* cannot diminish a film's social impact. As I write this, notice has come that *Io sono Li* is a finalist for the European Parliament's Lux Prize and that it will be shown again at the Venice Film Festival a year after its premiere — a most deserved honor and recognition.

—PASQUALE VERDICCHIO  
*University of California, San Diego*

*Italy: Love It or Leave It.*  
 By Gustav Hofer and Luca Ragazzi.  
 Hiq Productions, 2011.  
 75 minutes. DVD format, color.

Visitors to Italy often express admiration for it based on a superficial understanding of the *bel paese* — its ancient past, its picturesque towns and landscapes, and its local traditions and cuisine. While Italians are often proud of their own regional cultures and customs, their love for Italy has historically been complicated and put to the test by long-standing problems such as widespread corruption, a weak sense of national identity, and a shortage of attractive job opportunities, issues that still today play a crucial role in many people's decision to leave the country. An estimated 60,000 young people, most of whom have a university degree, leave Italy every year to explore professional opportunities that cities like Paris, London, and Berlin may offer or else take up the challenge of proving themselves in less familiar non-European destinations.

Whether or not to stay is the pressing question that informs and substantiates the documentary film *Italy: Love It or Leave It*, by Gustav Hofer and Luca Ragazzi. After six years of living in an apartment in Rome, the couple receives an eviction notice that compels them to confront the possibility of moving out not only of their usual living space but out of Italy altogether. Berlin could become their new home, Hofer proposes. The reasons for leaving are partially summed up at the beginning of the documentary through letters from their expatriate friends — parents with young children, colleagues, other couples. While an Italian audience is presumably familiar with these reasons, the film takes a closer look at specific aspects of contemporary life that appear to keep the country stagnant: the precarious conditions of factory workers, lack of respect toward the environment, an aging and often corrupt political class, and the commodification of women's bodies. In doing so, the film also provides a non-Italian audience with a more contemporary view of the most urgent issues affecting Italy in recent years. The film's exploration of a more hopeful Italy runs parallel to this disenchanting gaze; it is an Italy that often operates out of the limelight, made of people who fight daily against different forms of social and cultural inequality.