

A new culture is born  
An interview with Giuseppe Ferrara  
by Laura Barbieri

The construction of the Gela petrochemical plant, in the Sicily of the 1960s. Industrial development and the survival of ancient traditions.

“I had to describe, phase by phase, the construction of Gela’s petrochemical plant. For two years I traveled to Sicily every two or three months to film the next construction phase, a sort of fixed appointment, almost like an employee”.

Giuseppe Ferrara shot “Gela ancient and new” in 1963; this documentary shows the construction of one of Eni’s petrochemical facilities.

“They chose me for that job after my success as a director of documentaries. It was 1959, I had just obtained my diploma from the experimental cinema school, when I started my first documentary “Children of the Aqueduct”, which was financed by my father and won the “Silver Ribbon” journalistic film award. After that I paid special attention to reality, also in fiction movies. I have always thought it indispensable to ennoble fiction with real documents. The set for “The Moro Case” is all fiction, but the words the actor (Volonté) recites are the same as Moro said, or presumably said. The Gela petrochemical documentary is no fiction. The words recorded on the images have their importance”.

The spoken commentary to the “Gela ancient and new” was written by Leonardo Sciascia.

“I met the writer in Eni’s skyscraper. Mattei had just been killed, and unfortunately, I hadn’t met him, but my esteem for him had grown a lot during the shooting of the Gela documentary.

Ferrara confirms the description of his meeting with Sciascia published in a book on the writer.

“Sciascia had already seen my documentary and he must have liked it, or he wouldn’t have been there. And again, if he hadn’t shared Mattei’s idea to transfer start-up capital to the south of Italy for its industrialization, and if he hadn’t agreed with this “invasion” of technology, programming and employment, with all its possible consequences, again he wouldn’t have been there”.

(from “Leonardo Sciascia - Encounters with the Cinema”, by Sebastiano Gesù, Giuseppe Maimone, Catania 1992, page 173).

Ten days after this meeting we received the text for the voice-over. A dry text, Sciascia’s way of writing and expression.

“I went so often to Sicily that I soon got to know the town of Gela better, not only its industrial area, and then I had this idea of shooting a documentary that was not only technical. I thought of mixing the still underdeveloped but culturally strong present times of this town and of Sicily with this hypermodern construction, to describe the contrast between technology and a past still very much alive”.

The documentary shows some popular festivals, typical of the tradition of this island.

“Every time I went there, there was a surprise, a discovery. For Saint Joseph, the people of Gela organized an extraordinary charity event: about ten families prepared three personages chosen among the poorest in the town, a child, an old man and a girl, who represented the Holy Family. They dressed them in white tunics and put painted paper flower crowns on their heads. On these occasions all the wealthy families wanted to have them as guests. In the central church, about a hundred Jesus and Holy Mary children received the blessing and went to celebrate the feast to eat the enormous dinners that had been prepared. At the end of the feast the remaining food was distributed to poor families, who, for a week, had something to eat. I inserted in the documentary some significant moments of this folklore, which may have been lost”.

It took a lot to describe a place like Gela and the construction of a large plant, especially in the Sicily of the sixties.

“It was certainly innovating, but I don’t remember having met any special difficulty, maybe because I am a good director for great battles and I fear nothing. It looked like an experience to be lived with enthusiasm”.

Later, Giuseppe Ferrara returned to Sicily to work.

“I came back to this place when I was working on the Giovanni Falcone film”.

Today Gela has grown, and not only under the shadow of the petrochemical industry. It’s a real town.

“The first time I saw the place it was a sunburnt land, now it’s a town full of dust, crammed with broken roads full of chaotic traffic. I had the impression of a town born of a huge building speculation, in a social context still marked by little welfare.

It would be interesting today, forty years after, to make a documentary studying what role the petrochemical plant has played in the town of Gela.