

Michael Turner & Bruce LaBruce / SCENE FROM *UNTITLED VON GLOEDEN PROJECT*

Introduction

Near the end of the nineteenth-century, a young German aristocrat named Wilhelm Von Gloeden left art school and traveled to Taormina, Sicily, to repair his tubercular lungs. At his cousin's urging, he took up photography, acquiring a large-format camera. His first works were landscapes, but it is through portraiture that we know him best.

Taormina, in those days, was a poor fishing village. Many of Von Gloeden's models (mostly adolescent men) were Taormina residents, and he often dressed them in togas and laurel leaves — if he dressed them at all — for his Greek and Roman *mise-en-scènes*. ("Antiquity", like photography, was the rage, the former due in part to a series of archaeological finds in the Eastern Mediterranean around that time, the latter because it was new.) In return for their work, Von Gloeden gave his models "gifts."

Meanwhile, in the rest of Europe, while some plotted a "dictatorship of the proletariat," those of privilege imagined an innocent, less complicated utopia — arcadia — where people roamed the countryside in a state of protracted meditation — as evidenced in Von Gloeden's pastoral photographs, which were finding private audiences among the continent's wealthier patrons. However, it wasn't until a lucrative licensing deal with a postcard manufacturer, in the early-1900s, that Von Gloeden's photos became accessible to everyone. By then fans included Oscar Wilde, Isadora Duncan, Douglas Fairbanks, Gabriele D'Annunzio, all of whom traveled to Taormina under the pretext of visiting Von Gloeden's studio.

Now, I say "pretext" because what these visitors were *really* interested in was not Von Gloeden's studio but his models, who, although showing signs of malnutrition (distended bellies, rickets) revealed bodies closer to theirs than previous representations — the Caliban body, as opposed to the wispy Ariel. Plus many were well-endowed.

By 1922, when Mussolini came to power, Taormina was also well-endowed, no longer a fishing village but a full-fledged tourist town whose income derived largely from the sex trade. Although many of Von Gloeden's glass plates were confiscated or destroyed by the Fascist Squadristi, some managed to survive, and to this day remain iconic gay images, the most famous of which is *Caino*.

The Taormina of the present looks nothing like the fishing village of a hundred years ago. It is a quaint place, the architecture a mix of Rococo and Victorian Italianate, its narrow cobblestone streets lined with souvenir shops, restaurants, Gucci and Prada. The main attraction is the Greek theatre atop the hill. At any given moment, the place is swarming with tourists.

While much of the souvenir imagery is devoted to its three-legged sun god, Trinacria, or the tempestuous Etna, one thing you don't see is evidence of Von Gloeden. One has to ask for that. And if you get a response (and you will, because everybody in town is familiar with the photos) you are led to a shop with a curtained room full of postcards, posters, books, videotapes, t-shirts — all of it dedicated to the work of Von Gloeden, all of it for sale. A lucrative, though hidden, shrine to the man who made Taormina what it is today.

Which is where our film begins, in present-day Taormina, with filmmaker Bruce LaBruce (40s) arriving to prep his own film — based on the life and work of Wilhelm Von Gloeden. Although he has done some research, he knows nothing of his subject's historic impact on the town, nor does he know how the town felt about his employing young men as models — information he intends to get through a series of interviews arranged in advance of his arrival.

To assist him, Bruce hires a translator, a referral from an attendant at a tourist kiosk. The translator, Stella Rossi (30s), is an ambitious though lowly employee of the Taormina Chamber of Commerce. Like some Sicilians, she is ashamed of the Von Gloeden legacy, preferring to acknowledge the town's natural beauty — not Indo-European sex tourism — as the reason for its success. As you can imagine, things get ugly. The more Bruce discovers about Von Gloeden and his impact, the more Stella and her cohorts try to thwart him.

The scene I have selected occurs early in the film, the first interview. (Bruce, I should add, knows zero Italian.)

— Michael Turner

INT. "MRS. GRIMALDI'S" APARTMENT - DAY

CLOSE ON PAINTING - a traditional fishing scene. A beached boat, a lone fisherman picking through his net.

PANNING DOWN - A very old woman (80s). In black. She is seated in the middle of a love seat; in front of her, a coffee table. Her name, for all intents and purposes, is "MRS. GRIMALDI". In her hands, a postcard - the same postcard ("Boy With Horns and Javelin") as the one held up in the previous scene. She is looking at it, shaking her head. She looks at her guests as if to ask, Why me?

REVERSE POV -

BRUCE is taking aim with his DV camera.

BRUCE'S POV: ON "MRS. GRIMALDI" - A DV image.

BRUCE (OS)

Mrs. Grimaldi, I have it on good authority that the man in that photo is your father, Guiseppe Lupini. Can you tell me anything about him? Did he ever speak to you about his work with Wilhelm Von Gloeden?

STELLA

(to "Mrs. Grimaldi",
in Italian)

SUBTITLED: As I told you on the phone, Mr. LaBruce is a British detective. He is investigating the distribution of child pornography, and he wants to know if you've seen anybody in the neighbourhood selling pictures like the one in your hand.

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian)

SUBTITLE: I don't understand. These pictures are everywhere. What's the big deal? And why are you showing me this? Why not show me a picture of the man you're looking for?

STELLA

(translating)

She says she's not sure of your intentions. She's worried you might not be who you say you are, that you might be trying to blackmail her.

BRUCE

Tell her everything she tells me will be held in the strictest of confidences.

STELLA

(to "Mrs. G", in Italian)

SUBTITLE: He said they don't have a photo yet. Just evidence. He wants to know if you can describe the man selling these pictures.

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian)

SUBTITLE: How can I describe a man I haven't seen?

STELLA

(to Bruce)

She thanks you for your discretion. And yes, she knows about Von Gloeden and her father.

BRUCE

Ask her if she could tell me the story of how they first met.

STELLA

(in Italian)

SUBTITLE: Thank you very much for your time, Mrs. Grimaldi. Oh, and before we go, the detective noticed you were making something in the kitchen. He wonders if you would be so kind as to share with him your recipe?

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian, brightening)

SUBTITLE: Oh, it's quite simple really.

STELLA

(to Bruce)

Von Gloeden lived near her father.

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian)

SUBTITLE: You take a two pound chicken.

STELLA

Her father was working as a shepherd . . .

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian)

SUBTITLE: Put it in a pot with six cups of water . . .

STELLA

. . . when Von Gloeden approached him . . .

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(In Italian)

SUBTITLE: Add a pinch of salt . . .

STELLA

. . . and touched his genitals with feather duster . . .

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian)

SUBTITLE: Some pepper corns, garlic and celery . . .

STELLA

. . . then threatened to tell his friends he was a faggot . . .

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian)

SUBTITLE: . . . and boil it till the skin comes off.

STELLA

. . . if he didn't pose naked for photos.

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

SUBTITLE: Reduce heat. Add tomatoes, oregano, a bay leaf and sugar.

STELLA

He was never paid for his work.

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian)

Then put the lid on.

STELLA

And Von Gloeden told his friends he was a faggot anyway.

MRS. GRIMALDI turns to Bruce, smiling.

"MRS. GRIMALDI"

(in Italian, smiling)

SUBTITLE: Would you like to stay for dinner?

STELLA

She says she'd like to be paid in cash.

BRUCE lowers his camera, reaches for his wallet.

"MRS. GRIMALDI" looks confused.

BRUCE

(to Stella)

We agreed on fifty Euros, right?

STELLA

I told her a hundred.

BRUCE scowls, takes the money from his wallet, puts it on the coffee table. "MRS. GRIMALDI" gives STELLA a baffled look.

STELLA

(to "Mrs. Grimaldi",
smiling)

He says he'd love to. But he has to catch a plane.