

'THE LORDS OF THE RING'

By Chiara De Luca

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CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

In Apulia, right in the heart of Salento, between Nardò and Porto Cesareo, there is a ring-shaped test track almost 13 km long, perfectly designed and carved into the ground.

EMILIANO PERUCCA ORFEI - DRIVER TESTER AUTOMOTO.IT

That circumference allows this little big magic to travel at high speed endlessly. You can reach speeds close to 250 km/h without having to steer.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

Fiat built the track in the 1970s and decided to sell it in 1999. In 2012, it was acquired by the Porsche Group. The ring consists of 20 tracks and several test facilities extending over an area of 7 million square metres.

EVA GEORGANOPOULOU

Which car components are tested on the Nardò track?

EMILIANO PERUCCA ORFEI - DRIVER TESTER AUTOMOTO.IT

The engine, the cooling system, and the brakes are tested. Cars are tested every day; 90 per cent of the cars we see on the road have passed through the tests in Nardò.

MAN

They all come here, from Mercedes to Audi, Ferrari and McLaren.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

Local entrepreneurs appreciate the presence of the Porsche group in Salento.

MAN

Trust me, if there was no track, Porto Cesareo would have to close in winter!

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

Indeed, you only have to walk through the city centre of Porto Cesareo to see restaurants and businesses packed with people.

CHIARA DE LUCA

Where are you from?

BOY

England. I will be here from December to March. I work for Audi.

BOY

I am here on behalf of Aston Martin. We have a team of 12 people, and the Technical Centre has good tracks, good staff, and a great atmosphere.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

In short, it is a flagship for the Apulia region, an expression of an apparent coexistence between two worlds: the world of Porsche's cutting-edge technology and the rural world of the Salento region. The coexistence lasted until...

CLAUDIA BARTOLI - BOSCO D'ARNEO GUARDIANS COMMITTEE

The Region, in agreement with Porsche and the municipalities of Porto Cesareo and Nardò, has approved a project that, according to us, is heinous. It envisages cutting down 200 hectares of forest to make room for the expansion of the circuit.

SIGFRIDO RANUCCI IN STUDIO

The grey asphalt of the circuit inspired the "Nardò grey" Ferrari, a pride of Salento. But now we are at a crossroads: should we protect nature or economic interest? To have Porsche there, in short, is an asset for that area. The 500 technicians who tour hotels and restaurants and go shopping generate an annual revenue of 10 million euros. Or at least this is the estimate. Now, Porsche has a gigantic project in mind. A 400-million-euro investment. It wants to expand the track and build new apartment blocks and buildings. However, 200 hectares of a community interest site must be cleared to do so. Here, how do you get around the constraint? With a project of public relevance. Which one? Chiara De Luca will tell us.

MAN

We are sacrificing all this wealth, that is the equivalent of 300 football pitches, to benefit a corporation's private interests.

LADY

Another assault against the Salento territory.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

Porsche wants to implement a project to extend the circuit, aimed at modernising the 20 existing tracks but, above all, creating a further 9 tracks together with canteens, car parks, workshops and other buildings, such as workspaces for the guest teams of the Technical Centre.

ANTONIO DELLA ROCCA - CORRIERE DEL MEZZOGIORNO JOURNALIST

A true automotive citadel, probably even self-sufficient in many aspects.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

The new tracks are also designed to test electric and sustainable mobility. It would be a Green breakthrough if Porsche did not have to clear 200 hectares of woodland in a protected site of community importance to complete the project.

CLAUDIA BARTOLI - BOSCO D'ARNEO GUARDIANS COMMITTEE

Nothing could be more of a constraint to protect this area, where more than 400 varieties of plants have been found.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

The project realisation would also involve two habitat areas with a special type of vegetation protected by EU regulations.

ROCCO LABADESSA - ENVIRONMENTAL BIOLOGIST

A 'holm oak woodland' habitat of around 40 hectares within the area and a small proportion of Mediterranean grassland.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

Porsche owns the entire area involved in the project. These locations are not accessible to the general public or the scientific community because prototypes of cars that are still not on the market are tested in the circuit.

ENNIO CILLO - ENVIRONMENTAL LAWYER

First, there must be an environmental impact assessment, i.e., whether the area is adversely affected by these interventions.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

The Apulia Region conducted the environmental impact study, recognising that "the impacts on these components are negative and relevant". The Park Office of the Municipality of Porto Cesareo, which manages the nature reserve, also holds a similar opinion.

MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEE - PORTO CESAREO (LE)

We are bound to give a negative opinion. The intervention is detrimental to the existing landscape structure, and no one can deny this.

CHIARA DE LUCA

Hello Mayoress, this is Chiara De Luca from Report, we spoke on the phone.

SILVIA TARANTINO - MAYORESS OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF PORTO CESARIO (LE)

Ah hello! I make no statements. These are operations carried out by private individuals.

CHIARA DE LUCA

But you signed the programme agreement, Mayoress. In any case, you have your share of responsibility. The Mediterranean shrubland has been put on the back burner, isn't it?

SILVIA TARANTINO - MAYORESS OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF PORTO CESARIO (LE)

I'm not making statements. Is that OK?

CHIARA DE LUCA

All right, then I won't insist.

SILVIA TARANTINO - MAYORESS OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF PORTO CESARIO

Can I get you something? Mary, get her a hot *purceddhruzzu*.

CHIARA DE LUCA

No, thanks...

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

The Mayor of Nardò, Giuseppe Mellone, who was considered close to and supported in the last elections even by the President of the Region, Emiliano, has also signed the programme agreement for the project's realisation.

CHIARA DE LUCA

Good evening, Mayor. I am Chiara De Luca from Report. Why did the municipality of Nardò sign the programme agreement?

GIUSEPPE MELLONE - MAYOR OF NARDÒ (LE)

There's no need to chase me. If you need to talk to me, let's meet somewhere a little drier.

CHIARA DE LUCA

I requested the meeting mayor.

GIUSEPPE MELLONE - MAYOR OF NARDÒ (LE)

I told you to talk to the person who decided this, not to the mayor of Nardò.

CHIARA DE LUCA

As mayor of Nardò, what do you think?

GIUSEPPE MELLONE - MAYOR OF NARDÒ (LE)

That it is an important investment.

CHIARA DE LUCA

What about the Mediterranean vegetation that could be cut down? What do you think?

GIUSEPPE MELLONE - MAYOR OF NARDÒ (LE)

You have to talk to the regional government that has declared the public interest.

CHIARA DE LUCA

Both mayors I interviewed, invited me to talk to you.

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

In other words, they turned off their brains during the City Council. I don't think so.

CHIARA DE LUCA

I quote, of course.

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

You know very well that when an authoritative programme like Report comes along, everyone tries to get someone else to answer. I am the only one who is always here instead.

CHIARA DE LUCA - OFF-SCREEN

To overcome the negative environmental impact assessment, the Apulia region declares that the Porsche project is based on imperative reasons of relevant public interest. What are these reasons and how were they justified?

FILIPPO COLAPINTO - EXPERT IN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

They are human health and public safety.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

The important public interest of the Porsche health project is the construction of a medical centre with a helicopter rescue within the circuit, which, apart from intervening in the event of an accident on the tracks, will be integrated into the regional health system. Crew, helicopters, and medical personnel will be chargeable to the Apulia region. Which, however, already lacks in this regard.

ANTONIO MAZZARELLA - SECRETARY FP CGIL DOCTORS AND HEALTH MANAGERS APULIA

Apulia is under a recovery plan, so we cannot purchase goods and services. With the departments merging, citizens have lower benefits and services and we are unable to hire more staff.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

According to the regional government's resolution declaring the reasons of relevant public interest, the presence of this emergency medical hub with an equipped heliport guarantees a rapid connection with the Vito Fazzi hospital in Lecce and the *Centro Grandi Ustionati* in Brindisi, which, however, both have no place for landing...

ANTONIO MAZZARELLA - SECRETARY FP CGIL DOCTORS AND HEALTH MANAGERS APULIA

Let's say there is a serious car accident on the coast road. The ambulance leaves and picks up the patient. It stabilises him, picks him up and puts him in the ambulance to take him to this remote private place in the countryside of Nardò. After that, he takes off from the heliport. Where to?

CHIARA DE LUCA

I understand that there is no helicopter landing strip at the Vito Fazzi hospital. How do patients land?

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

No, I mean, Lecce is very close to Nardò, so it would be absurd to go there by helicopter.

CHIARA DE LUCA

Reference is made precisely to the fact that this centre has a very, let's say, efficient connection with the Vito Fazzi hospital and the Brindisi *Grandi Ustionati* hospital.

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

It has none, at least not at present.

CHIARA DE LUCA

Hence, this part here of the resolution should be corrected.

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

There is no point in flying by helicopter from Nardò.

CHIARA DE LUCA

This is what you wrote!

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

No, no, no. There may be a misunderstanding. The facility is able to operate on even particularly complex cases independently of the helicopter.

CHIARA DE LUCA

We can say that it is an advanced first aid point...

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

Equipped with an operating theatre.

CHIARA DE LUCA

With operating theatres, with the Porsche knowing that anyone can get in...

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

Of course, of course. This is not a game, as Totò would say.

CHIARA DE LUCA

No, no...

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

One of the reasons of major public interest is also safety, which means that Porsche will undertake to make its own fire-fighting service, the circuit's one, available to the community.

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

They pledged to implement CCTV and surveillance drones across the whole area.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

However, the European Commission itself is raising doubts about the public interest of the project in response to a question tabled by MEP Rosa D'Amato.

ROSA D'AMATO - MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The Commission replied that it would investigate, so it is already a clear position of Commissioner Sinkevičius. We will go on until we get answers.

MICHELE EMILIANO - PRESIDENT OF THE APULIA REGION

I will be in Brussels in a few days. If Mr Sinkevičius phones me, I will go and see him. But if he does not call me, I have nothing to say to him.

I am very calm because I work based on investigations made by top professionals in the Civil Protection and health sector, who have told me: "President, let's make this agreement because it is a profitable one."

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

To intervene on the protected site, Porsche has to implement compensatory measures.

ENNIO CILLO - ENVIRONMENTAL LAWYER

Where there is an actual need, because they are of particular economic importance and necessary for protecting human health. If these requirements are met, we can consider carrying out the work with compensation.

CHIARA DE LUCA OFF-SCREEN

Against one million cut-down trees and 200 hectares of protected land taken away, Porsche has to replant more than twice as many.

ANDREA OCCHILUPO - FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE REGIONAL NATURE RESERVES LITORALE TARANTINO ORIENTALE

The authority that initiated this compensation should have given a further prescription. It had to anticipate the replanting intervention.

CHIARA DE LUCA

By how many years?

ANDREA OCCHILUPO - FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE TARANTO EAST COAST REGIONAL NATURE RESERVES

At least three years. Now, this will lead to an ecosystem imbalance.

ROCCA LABADESSA - ENVIRONMENTAL BIOLOGIST

I estimate it will take several decades to reach a tree formation comparable to the one we are now evaluating in the project area.

SIGFRIDO RANUCCI IN STUDIO

To compensate, Porsche will now have to plant seedlings. The ones it wants to plant cost 2,28 euros and are usually 40-50 centimetres tall. It will take decades to compensate for the 200 hectares of deforestation. Besides, we must see if it will work. In short, only future generations, those for whom the constitution has decreed to defend biodiversity, will have the final say. For the planting, Porsche needs new land. Expropriation letters have started and we will see if the compensation agreements will be reached. Meanwhile, the European Union and the European Commission, with the Environment Minister Sinkevičius, will judge the project's public utility. However, for our Ministry of the Environment, the requirements of sociality and economy should be stated rather than talking about the project's public utility for health and safety. Nevertheless, it sent the project to Europe. In short, we will see outsiders will be able to access the Emergency Room within the Porsche site. I mean, we couldn't even get in to shoot the pictures. That's it.