

The Italian Cinema and the Italian Working Class

Ruth Ben-Ghiat

New York University

Abstract

This essay examines representations of the Italian working class from the 1930s through the 1970s. I analyze four films produced at four crucial moments in Italian labor and film history (*Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!*, Mario Camerini, 1932; *Ladri di biciclette*, Vittorio De Sica, 1946; *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, Luchino Visconti, 1960; and *Mimi metallurgico ferito nell'onore*, Lina Wertmuller, 1972). I discuss the specific political climates that shaped these films' production and reception, paying attention to the role workers were to play as audiences in Communist and Catholic strategies of mass organization. I also highlight continuities of theme and attitude in Italian movies about the working class. A preoccupation with the maintenance of family structures links films by Camerini, De Sica, and Visconti—directors of different cinematic styles, political affiliations, and generations. Only after 1968 do directors such as Wertmuller subject such mindsets and their attendant social practices to sustained critique.

In his book, *In Search of Paradise: The Worker in the Italian Cinema* (Genoa, 1992), Carlo Carotti argues that the Italian working class has been “repressed and hidden. . . . [It is] an imaginary character” in the repertory of postwar national cinematic representations.¹ A blend of political and economic factors, he contends, conspired to create this situation. State censorship by Christian Democrat governments prevented many labor-themed movies from entering production, as did market considerations that privileged crowd-pleasing melodramas and comedies over dramas about labor exploitation. While Carotti's conclusions are a mix of insight and hyperbole, it is true that Italy has produced relatively few films that center on workers, especially given the historic strength of the country's labor movements and the popularity of the Italian Communist party. In this essay, I examine the problem of the representation of Italian workers in the Italian cinema in the postwar period. I analyze four films produced at four crucial moments in Italian film and labor history (the early 1930s, the late 1940s, the early 1960s, and the early 1970s) and discuss the specific political climates that shaped their production and reception. Yet, I also wish to highlight continuities of theme and attitude in Italian movies about the working class that reflect the enduring influences of Catholic ideology and traditional cultural values among national filmmakers. A preoccupation with the maintenance of family structures, for example, links films by directors of different cinematic styles, political affiliations, and generations. Only in the 1960s, with the emergence of filmmakers such as Pier

Paolo Pasolini, Liliana Cavani, and Lina Wertmüller (whose 1972 film *The Seduction of Mimi/Mimi metallurgico ferito nell'onore* will be discussed here), were such mindsets and their attendant social practices subject to a sustained critique.

My readings of films are integrated with discussions of the Italian working class as a film audience. In recent decades, theoreticians and historians of film spectatorship have called attention to the elements that disrupt or limit the process of identification between the film viewer and the action or characters on screen. Contradictions or ambiguities within movies, born of the clash between mandates to make money, to entertain, and to instruct or moralize, open the possibility for spectators to draw unintended messages or even opposing conclusions from those envisioned by filmmakers.² Within the history of Italian cinema, the subversive potential of such open readings is most striking in the case of Fascist-era movies. The desire to craft a profitable and exportable national film product led to films whose Hollywood-influenced aesthetics often undermined the dictatorship's autarchic and social engineering imperatives.³ Such internal conflicts are also notable, however, in postwar films by politically and pedagogically committed directors such as the Communists Giuseppe De Santis and Luchino Visconti. Movies such as the latter's 1960 *Rocco and His Brothers/Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, which will be discussed below, draw in viewers with an emphasis on sexuality and spectacle that undercuts and threatens to overwhelm didactic messages about the virtues of honest labor and class solidarity.

Such textual analyses have their limits, however, as a means of illuminating the conditions in which films were produced and viewed. Drawing on recent studies that historicize and contextualize the practice of film spectatorship, I will also examine the consolidation of a film-viewing culture in contemporary Italy that ranged from the prestigious Venice Biennale competition to parish cinemas and private, Church, or party-sponsored neighborhood cineclubs that brought together artisans, students, and factory workers.⁴ The question of what workers thought of the films they saw remains a more vexing one, and the literature on the Italian case is particularly sparse. A sociological investigation of cinema audiences carried out in Tuscan and Sardinian villages in the late 1950s remains, to my knowledge, one of the only detailed interview-based inquiries into how the cinema was experienced in postwar Italy as a cultural product and as a leisure habit. More typical are the historically-oriented studies by Vittorio Spinazzola and Gian Piero Brunetta; the former approaches the issue of reception through discussions of critical reviews and box-office receipts, and the latter, while making a huge contribution to our knowledge of the topography of Italian film culture, takes a top-down approach in its focus on intellectuals and Church and party film policies.⁵ In the absence of data regarding working class reactions to films, my essay will discuss the social contexts in which workers viewed films, and the place workers occupied as an audience within the bids for mass influence formulated by the Church and the Italian Communist party (PCI) after 1945.

Men, What Rascals They Are!: *Resilience and Resignation under Fascism*

The two decades of Fascist dictatorship (1922–1943) saw the destruction of Italy's flourishing Socialist party and fledgling Communist party and the disarmament of Italian labor. In the face of widespread demands for democratization after World War One, industrial, business, and landowning elites threw their support behind Benito Mussolini, who offered them a utopia of economic development without social strife.⁶ Yet the movement also found a measure of grassroots support among demobilized soldiers, landless peasants, and others who believed it would bring them prosperity and social justice. Even as he shut down the Italian Left with a combination of legislation and violence, the ex-Socialist Mussolini utilized its language in making his populist promises. Socialism might offer workers the easy happiness of “wine, women, chicken, and cinema,” he proclaimed shortly before he came to power, but only Fascism would effect a revolutionary transformation of the social, economic, and moral realms.⁷

The meaning of this “revolution” for Italian labor was soon revealed. The 1925 Palazzo Vidoni Pact shut down trade unionism, giving all bargaining power to newly created Fascist syndicates, while laws against associationism, the proclamation of one-party rule, and the imprisonment of prominent leftists like Antonio Gramsci decimated the worker parties.⁸ At the same time, the government laid the foundations of its own corporatist programs that would reorganize the economy by category rather than class. For workers, corporativism meant a further decrease in bargaining rights with employers who managed to manipulate the new system to sustain old privileges. It is no wonder that a steady stream of informers' reports made clear that many laborers in central and northern Italy received the regime's radical rhetoric with some skepticism.⁹ Yet, as Maurizio Gribaudi has shown, young Turinese workers were attracted by Fascism's modernizing pretensions, and millions of workers took advantage of the low-cost train trips, theater tickets, and summer holidays for their children offered by the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND, or National Leisure Time Organization). Women workers also exploited Fascist welfare initiatives for their own benefit even as they resisted the natalist mandates that inspired these initiatives. Ultimately, the regime had at best a mixed success in its attempts to nationalize Italian laborers by destroying the organizations and cooperative networks that had long marked working-class life.¹⁰

Cinema was to play a central role in Fascist projects of nationalization. Within the first year of his rule, Mussolini established a documentary and newsreel production center (the Istituto Luce), sending a message about the primacy of propaganda within his state. Funding for feature films did not come until almost a decade later, though, and since the once flourishing Italian movie industry had been decimated by World War One, private production companies were few and far between. By the time the semipublic Cines studio complex began operation, widespread disaffection with the regime in the wake of the Depression made the need for consensus-building strategies urgent. Over the next years, films appeared that supported the emerging grand themes of Fascism—

colonialism, land reclamation, new mass leisure initiatives, natalism—and offered a model of modernity marked by the reinforcement of class and gender hierarchies.¹¹ Factory workers would have seen these films in parish or commercial theaters, sometimes with subsidized tickets provided by the OND, while rural laborers depended on the visits of traveling cinema cars modeled on those used in Soviet Russia.

Although a bland populism permeates many Fascist-era movies, representations of factory labor were relatively rare during the dictatorship. At a time of economic crisis and international working-class mobilization, the regime preferred to avoid a world still associated in the popular mind with Italian socialism. Preventive censorship mechanisms instituted in the early 1930s ensured that very few factory-themed films got past the story stage. Yet many movies featured working-class protagonists who modeled the new behaviors and values that were to mark Italian laborers as they were mobilized in the service of the regime.

Mario Camerini's 1932 Cines film *Men, What Rascals They Are!* illustrates how the problem of working-class desires for emancipation was addressed in the Fascist-era cinema. The film uses glossy settings—a Milan of bustling streets, vibrant trade fairs, and streamlined consumer emporiums—to entice viewers and facilitate audience identification with its frustrated working-class protagonists (played by Lia Franca and Vittorio De Sica, here in his first film role). Since Bruno works as a car mechanic and chauffeur, and Mariuccia is a salesgirl in an expensive perfumery, both are continually exposed to luxury products that they could never afford for themselves. As in many of Camerini's films, these frustrations find an outlet in role playing, which creates temporary transgressions of normally rigid social boundaries. In this case, Bruno pretends to own a luxury convertible that he is repairing, and convinces Mariuccia to go on an outing to Lake Como, where the two fall in love. After many comic misunderstandings, he proposes in the back of a taxi that, coincidentally, is driven by Mariuccia's father. The film ends with Bruno moving from the back to the front of the cab so that his future father-in-law can transport a wealthy couple to their destination. Happiness comes from accepting one's inherited social station, the film intimates. By giving up false illusions of autonomy, both automotive and social, Bruno gains a family and a chance at finding inner peace.

The social conservatism that permeates the film can be found in many Camerini films, but also shows the influence of its co-screenwriter, Mario Soldati. A young author and future director, Soldati had recently returned from two years in New York City full of ambivalence about the social and affective consequences of unrestricted economic mobility. Indeed, if the movie showcases the machines that power Italian modernity, it also makes clear the price those machines exact from those who labor to keep them running. The scenes that take place inside the Milan Trade Fair, where both Bruno and Mariuccia find temporary work, are emblematic in this regard. The chaotic environment of the Fair, with its blaring radio announcements and mobile advertisements, emphasizes the randomness and venality of modern social interactions. After a propagandistic demonstration of new Italian machinery taken from Istituto LUCE docu-

mentary films, we see the human cost of technological progress. Bruno's job demonstrating machinery requires him to wear a primitive megaphone strapped to his head that strangles his voice and renders him almost unrecognizable. At the close of the film, his fate is decidedly mixed. The little employment he has is alienating and humiliating, but he has gained happiness in his personal life.

This familialist message may have been lost on many viewers, who flocked to see *Men, What Rascals They Are!* for its jazzy score, dynamic images of a modern Italy, and the charms of Vittorio De Sica. Workers would have been provided with reduced-fee tickets from the OND, which offered them the chance to see new Italian releases cheaply, and would have heard its theme song—which became a top hit in Italy—on the radio of the local bar. Whatever the intent of the filmmakers, the disjuncture between ideology and aesthetics in the film probably undercut its efficacy as a vehicle of worker resocialization. Among audiences who had been exposed to the glamour of Hollywood films, its sober message about the need to renounce fantasies of social mobility might well have been overwhelmed by the images of consumer paradise it offered. As we will see, such tensions between visuals and narrative, education and entertainment, mark postwar Italian films on working-class themes as well.

Bicycle Thieves: *Workers and Society in the Reconstruction Years*

The Italian worker movement emerged from World War Two with high hopes for a new era of social justice. The constitutional proclamation of Italy as a “republic of labor” reflected the strength of the organizations that had shaped the Resistance and were now influential on the shop floor and in national political life: chiefly, the Committee of National Liberation, which had governed anti-Fascist Italy, the PCI, which had coordinated the Armed Resistance, and the PCI-linked General Confederation of Italian Labor (CGIL), which successfully fought for worker self-governance mechanisms within factories and other union reforms. Yet, like the purges of Fascist bosses from Italian workplaces and institutions, such labor gains were short-lived. Intense negotiations between 1946 to 1948 produced new labor arrangements that brought workers some tangible benefits (bonuses, guaranteed minimum holidays, a single national wage) but ultimately gave employers the upper hand.¹² These labor reversals reflected in part the setbacks suffered by the leftist parties in those years, as Cold War interests recast Italian high politics. In the spring of 1947, in expectation of Marshall Plan monies, the ruling Christian Democrat party (DC) engineered the expulsion of the Socialist and Communist parties from the government. Over the next years, amidst runaway inflation, unemployment, and war-produced material devastation, the Church-backed DC would seek a popular base to complement its monopoly on power, and the PCI would formulate social and cultural policies designed to forge its own mass constituency.

The cinema was an essential component in both factions' attempts to gain influence and votes at the grassroots level, and both Catholics and Communists attempted to expand their control of the contexts of film production and recep-

tion in the late 1940s. The war had not diminished Italians' voracious appetite for films, and neither did the difficult economic conditions of the immediate postwar prove a deterrent. Although ticket prices rose faster than incomes in this period, the number of commercial theaters doubled between 1938 and 1948, and parish venues quadrupled in the same period. Indeed, Italians' consumption of films made them one of the biggest spectator markets in Europe. Of seventy billion lire spent for entertainment in 1949, fifty-four billion went for cinema, far more than for sports or theater. Commenting on the cinema's centrality within the landscape of postwar Italian recreation, Brunetta has written of its ability to "modify collective habits, substituting other forms of popular socialization and diversion, becoming, in a very brief time, a permanent expense of the family budget."¹³ Since American films heavily dominated the Italian market, though, widespread fears existed that Italians would be socialized to American rather than Italian ways of acting and thinking. Such fears transcended factionalism and ideology: Catholics and Communists competed for popular audiences as much with Hollywood as with each other during the Cold War.¹⁴

Catholic activists within the DC and the Church showed perhaps the most savvy in their efforts to exploit the cinema's potential for mass mobilization. Although Church officials had considered films to be carriers of moral decadence, they recognized that they could be used to instill Catholic values and steer Italians away from "unacceptable" political ideologies. Through the Catholic Cinematographic Center's film rating system, the Catholics had long exercised their own form of film censorship; now they began to concentrate on expanding their control of the contexts of film production and reception. Along with the post-Mass Sunday screenings held in parish theaters, they sponsored a network of cinema circles ("cineforums") that held projections oriented to the popular classes.¹⁵

Cinema was in theory even more central to Communist strategies of mass organizing. Indeed, the creation of a national worker culture that would serve as a vessel of Communist ideals was a top priority for a party that had lost the possibility of exerting influence through governance at the national level. Yet as Stephen Gundle has observed, the traditionalism of PCI chief Palmiro Togliatti and many other officials made them somewhat aversive to films and other forms of mass entertainment. Their notions of worker leisure, which centered on the neighborhood *Case del popolo* with their reading circles, amateur theater, and night courses, did not extend to the viewing of screen sirens in an anonymous and dark setting. As one militant wrote in 1947, the goal of the worker movement was to "substitute activity for passivity, spiritual commitment for superficial diversions . . . so that the proletariat will wean itself gradually from sport, cinema, and other forms of exploitation . . . and become an active creator of its own life."¹⁶ While this attitude continued to exist in the PCI throughout the Cold War, a more pragmatic ethos also took hold that viewed cinema as a superior means of party propaganda. That same year, in fact, the Left-linked Italian Federation of Cinema Circles was born as a means of bringing programs of appropriate films to workers and others of the Communist constituency. Scheduled

Sunday mornings to compete with the Mass-and-cineforum bill offered by the Catholics, the cinema circle projections constituted the PCI's main attempt to utilize mass culture to appeal to the working class. By 1950, ninety such clubs existed in Italy with more than 16,000 members. These men and women had been mobilized often in those years to attend screenings and discussions of films that had become targets of Christian Democrat censorship or critique.¹⁷

Among these films was *Bicycle Thieves/Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), one of the gems of the Neorealist movement. Neorealism brought Italian film the international audiences and profits it had lacked during Fascism, but angered government officials and conservative critics at home for its mission of social denunciation. In the case of *Bicycle Thieves*, it was De Sica's focus on unemployment and the general poverty of postwar Italy that provoked a reaction. The film narrates the story of a bill poster, Antonio, whose livelihood is threatened when his bicycle is stolen during his first day on the job. Played by a real worker (Lamberto Maggiorani from the Breda factory in Milan), Antonio is a study in dejection. Years of unemployment have left him despondent and humiliated in front of his wife and son, who live in a cave-like apartment without running water. He has high hopes, though, as he retrieves his bicycle from the pawnbroker after he hears about his new job. Of the "Fides" mark, it is a symbol of working-class mobility and security, and its theft speaks to the failure of trust and the breakdown of civic values in contemporary Italian society. This crisis is only exacerbated by the attitudes of the police, who let Antonio know that the crime is too small to pursue, and leave him to find the bicycle on his own. As Antonio and his son Bruno undertake a desperate search through Rome, De Sica charts a geography of the dispossessed. We see squalid alleyways, overflowing soup kitchens, and neighborhood brothels—and everywhere hordes of unemployed men whose frustration gives the film an urgent energy.

By showing how a "trivial" event by bourgeois standards can be catastrophic for a worker, De Sica forced his viewers to consider issues of class and subject position. The casting of a "real" worker in the role of the unfortunate Antonio made this confrontation all the more affecting. Working-class spectators might have been moved to empathy, solidarity, and action, while bourgeois viewers—perhaps De Sica's real target—would have been unable, at least for the duration of the film, to avoid harsh national realities. As the director commented in an article on *Bicycle Thieves*, he wanted to call attention to things "that no newspaper wants to talk about . . . [to] what happens before our eyes to the most helpless among us . . . to the suffering of the humble."¹⁸

Although De Sica was more of a humanitarian than a political revolutionary, his movie evinces a strong sense of class solidarity. The moral gap in the film is ultimately not between Antonio and the bicycle thief, who turns out to be an impoverished epileptic teenager, but between the poor and a state that responds with indifference to those in need. Indeed, as the thief transmutes from culprit into victim, so does the victim also become a transgressor of the law. At the end of the film, with his bicycle still missing, Antonio becomes a bicycle thief him-

self. His capture and subsequent pardon by the ever-present male crowd, which acts here as a popular tribunal, only reinforces the sense of collective solidarity against a state that has lost its moral authority. The choice to use the plural in the film's title (bicycle *thieves*) speaks to De Sica's belief in a collective victimization of the poor at the hands of Italian institutions.

Bicycle Thieves is not only concerned with the material consequences of the contemporary Italian crisis, however. De Sica also calls attention to the weakening of patriarchal authority and the consequent damage to family structures. For Antonio is not merely an unemployed worker, but a husband and father whose paralysis in the face of his misery throws family hierarchies into disarray. Over the course of the film, it is in fact Bruno who emerges as the capable caregiver. He shows impatience at his father's passivity, and comforts him in the face of his failures and abjection. At the same time, Bruno is a vulnerable child. He constantly mirrors his father, looking for affirmation and clues as to appropriate male behavior, and a scene in which he is followed by an effeminate man only underscores De Sica's message that strong fathers are essential for the stability of the family. A bystander's comment to Antonio when he is apprehended in his thievery—"a nice thing to teach your son"—refers not only to the petty crime but to Antonio's public humiliation in front of the watchful Bruno. We could all become bicycle thieves, De Sica seems to intimate, but we must not abdicate the patriarchal authority that will allow the Italian family to weather the current crisis.¹⁹

To Christian Democrat officials, De Sica appeared less a social conservative than a troublemaker who painted a negative portrait of Italian society at a delicate time in geopolitical affairs. *Bicycle Thieves* fueled the fires of men such as Giulio Andreotti (then undersecretary of the Presidenza Consiglio dei Ministri), who saw it as further evidence that the Neorealists were out to stir up further social strife at home and ruin Italy's international reputation. Soon after the movie's release, Andreotti warned the film workers' syndicates that they must not continue to make movies that depict "the most deleterious aspects of our national life."²⁰ The Catholic Cinematographic Center followed suit in steering Italians away from the film; its widely circulated movie-ratings guide labelled *Bicycle Thieves* "a dangerous work" marred by "excessive pessimism." De Sica also found himself criticized by some on the Left, who disliked the film's sentimentalism and its focus on a "marginal profession" rather than on factory labor. The PCI did give its support to the film, mobilizing workers to attend screenings, including those De Sica himself introduced in major cities in 1948. And *Bicycle Thieves* did well with the general public, coming in eighth in box-office receipts out of fifty-four films made that year.²¹ Ultimately, the individual whose career was most affected by the film was not De Sica, but Maggiorani, its working-class protagonist. In 1949, having been fired from the Breda plant along with five hundred of his peers, he became, in real life, the unemployed worker he had played so effectively on screen. Luckily, Maggiorani quickly found refuge in the world of cinema, first as an actor specializing in working-class roles and then as a laborer behind the scenes.²²

Rocco and His Brothers: *The Underside of the "Economic Miracle"*

Maggiorani's move from industrial to film production was well-timed. The Italian cinema experienced a boom in the early 1950s. Italy became the largest production center in all of Europe, and national film output almost quadrupled between 1948 and 1952. Italy also boasted the biggest and most rapidly expanding spectator market, with southern Italy and the provinces providing new publics to augment the urban audience base. The cinema club movement mushroomed as well. Hundreds of new independent, Catholic, and Communist groups appeared over the decade in every part of the country.²³ A pioneering interview-based study of rural Italian film audiences concluded that the presence of a cinema in a village was viewed as "an element of progress, an instrument of communication with the rest of the world, a breath of intense actuality and contemporaneity." Even the advent of broadcast television in 1954 did not dampen this fervor. Rather, the experience of television viewing seemed to boost interest in film viewing among young people, who increasingly formed the bulk of Italian movie audiences from Turin to the Sardinian town of Thiesi.²⁴

For Italians who remained in the factories, though, the 1950s were difficult times. The 1948 elections had cemented a DC monopoly on governance that was exercised through American-backed "centrist" coalitions that excluded the Left. Over the next decade, the DC's aim to "depoliticize the workplace" translated into support for policies of labor repression.²⁵ With the unions splintered on party lines and often at war among themselves, employers were able to implement strategies of labor disarmament that ranged from antistrike bonuses to firing communists and segregating union activists. The powerful CGIL found itself isolated in the wake of a 1954 agreement between the Italian industrialists' organization Confindustria and the two non-Communist unions (the CSIL and the UIL), facilitating the neutralization of workers' internal committees at important factories such as Fiat. Only in the early 1960s, when cross-union strikes mobilized the work force of Italy's industrial triangle, did the labor movement begin the process of reclaiming its unity and potency.²⁶

For the government and Italian employers, the suppression of worker strength formed part of a larger plan to facilitate the country's emergence to international economic prominence. The abandonment of protectionism would facilitate the opening of foreign markets to Italian goods, they reasoned, while increased automatization would boost productivity. As economic policy, it was phenomenally successful: Industrial production rose ninety-five percent in the first half of the decade alone, national income increased over ten percent between 1951 and 1963, and the jump in exports brought Italy into the mainstream of international trade.²⁷ Cheaper consumer goods made televisions, Vespa scooters, and even automobiles (the affordable Fiat 500) accessible to middle- and upper working-class Italians; the boom in cinema spectatorship was hence merely one facet of a larger revolution in national leisure habits. Yet the label of "economic miracle" that historians and analysts of Italy often use to describe these developments hides the very prosaic quotidian labor conditions that made

such growth possible: low wages, weak unions, and a new labor force composed of desperate migrants from the impoverished South. Over two million Italians moved from the South to the industrial cities of the North between 1951–61; an equal number made the same journeys the decade after.²⁸ It was these men and women who made possible Italy's rapid conversion from a rural agricultural society to an urban industrial one; behind the "economic miracle" was a massive demographic shift that had extraordinary social, human, cultural, and material consequences.

Both historical document and auteurist masterpiece, Luchino Visconti's 1960 film *Rocco and His Brothers* dramatically evokes the dreams and the difficulties occasioned by these collective transformations. Through the vicissitudes of one family (the Parondis, who move from Lucania in the deep South to Milan), Visconti conveys a searing message of political actuality (the dire conditions faced by most migrant workers) and meditates on the demise of traditional collectivist values in an individualistic consumer society. The film's five chapters tell the story of five brothers and their very different destinies in their adopted city. By the film's end, Vincenzo and Ciro are the most assimilated, with stable jobs (construction and factory labor) and new affective ties that offer a measure of independence from a family that, by Northern standards, is all-consuming. Simone is the catalyst for the film's melodrama. The "best son" back home in his mother's estimation, Simone's fantasies of glamour and glory in the metropolis now lead him first to a tormented relationship with the prostitute Nadia and then to a path of murder (of Nadia) and self-destruction. Rocco, whose blind loyalty to Simone leads him to follow his brother into boxing and misery, provides the film's emotional center. He is an otherworldly figure, not only for his innocence and purity, but for an altruism and tribalism that have little place in 1960 Milan. Indeed, he speaks repeatedly of his desire to return to the South, perhaps with Luca, the youngest brother of the family. Ultimately, his sad fate (to pay off Simone's debts, he accepts lifetime servitude to the pimpish boxing promoter who desires Simone) illustrates how fundamental Southern values such as family solidarity and honor can become liabilities in a North dominated by the capitalist ethos of rationality and self-realization. Indeed, the worker Ciro, who of all the family adapts most easily to his new surroundings, is also the one who violates the code of *omertà* (protective silence) and turns Simone into the police.²⁹

Visconti was a longtime communist when he made *Rocco*, and Gramscian thinking inspires the film's overall narrative architecture and its ideology. Particularly relevant are Gramsci's views on Italy's "Southern Question," which posited an alliance between Northern industrial workers and Southern peasants as the precursor for social revolution. The optimistic ending Visconti chose to give to his film—Luca visits Ciro at his plant and expresses a desire to return to the South—holds out the promise of such an alliance, making the Parondi family a potential paragon of a new Gramscian "national-popular" society.³⁰ Visconti's political intent in making the film can be further explored through the character of Ciro, who represents the mixed blessings of the "successful" mi-

grant's life. While Rocco and Simone's energies go to boxing and Nadia, and Vincenzo woos his fiancée, Ciro studies at night and takes care of his mother. While his brothers prefer to keep their troubles among themselves, he has faith in the police and other institutions to deliver justice. Indeed, he warns Rocco that his loyalty to Simone is misguided, since Simone endangers the family's future. "We are seeds from the same plant, seeds that must produce healthy fruit. If one of these seeds is rotten, it must be separated from the others," he states shortly before he informs on Simone. Ultimately, Ciro acts against his family for the sake of the family; more precisely, he acts against his family as a Southern entity in order to ensure their continuing mutation into Northerners. When his brothers joke that he is "more Milanese than Ginetta," referring to Vincenzo's Northern-born wife, it is both a compliment and a criticism.

With his rational and pragmatic mentality, so suited for the culture of assembly-line capitalism, it is fitting that Ciro should achieve the most complete assimilation. His pearl-wearing fiancée is not only Milanese, but middle-class; he becomes not just a factory laborer, but an elite worker (*un operaio specializzato*) at the Alfa Romeo plant. Although Ciro has no desire to return home, the film's last frames, which are set on the grounds of Ciro's factory, suggest that a new worker culture can be forged from the fusion of Northern and Southern values. Filmed from the rear, he is indistinguishable from the other workers who stream back into the plant at the end of their lunch break. He emerges from the crowd, though, to kiss his fiancée and to reassure Luca, who brought him lunch and now tells him to "come home after work. We'll be waiting for you." For Visconti, as for many other Italian Communists, the family could serve as a humanizing and protective agent for Italian workers as they confronted a changing world in and outside of the factory.³¹

Rocco caused a storm of controversy when it was released in October 1960, more for its violence and eroticism (hetero- and homosexual) than for its representations of urban poverty. The day after its premiere, the Attorney General of Milan requested that fifteen minutes of "obscenity" be cut, and the Catholic press labelled it a "licentious" work at "the limits of ethical and aesthetic perversion." In the end, Visconti had to submit to the cuts, and could only retaliate by denouncing the government's anti-democratic tendencies in an open letter to the Ministry of Interior.³² Nor was critical reaction very encouraging. Some of Visconti's communist comrades objected to his showcasing of "atypical" worker delinquency, although others, such as the influential critic Guido Aristarco, felt that the film's theatricality mirrored the hallucinatory reality of the migrants it portrayed.³³ The character of Ciro came in for particular scrutiny by reviewers, who saw him as an emblem of the current mass peasant-to-worker transformation. Pier Paolo Pasolini considered Ciro the film's only "authentic" figure, but many critics complained that Ciro received short shrift considering his importance to the movie's ideology. Franco Fortini lamented the absence of class consciousness in Ciro and the omission of any social context for him outside that of the family. Especially egregious, in Fortini's view, was the screen absence of "the true place of conflict [and] renewal, that is, the scene of industrial produc-

tion; [here] we have a vision of a crowd of worker ranks who don't know what they are doing in the factory." Visconti argued that *Ciro* did in fact acquire a new consciousness of his "duties and rights" in the course of the film, one that reflected a "future vision of his country that reflects the model of ideal unity developed by Antonio Gramsci."³⁴

As often happens in the history of spectatorship, official efforts at censorship only created more interest in the event being censored. Over 600,000 Italians saw *Rocco* during the first two weeks of its run in fifteen major cities, and only Fellini's *La dolce vita* eclipsed it at the box-office that year. While it also received a Special Jury prize at the 1960 Venice Biennale, its real spectator base proved to be among the lower rather than the middle and upper classes. Most of its profits, in fact, came from sold-out showings in second-run cinemas on the periphery frequented by workers and artisans.³⁵ As Sam Rohdie has speculated, the film's popular viewers may have been drawn in as much by its glamorous sheen and aura of transgression as by its political militancy. Indeed, a sociological study of Italian audiences carried out two years before the release of *Rocco* found that working-class viewers preferred tragic love stories and the comedy and police/spy genres to sober works of social denunciation.³⁶ Conflicts between commerce and art were probably not on Visconti's mind when he made the film, however. His internal battle as a communist director was instead between aesthetics and ideology, between the excess of passion and the discipline of revolution. The contrast between the rational *Ciro* and his tormented brothers in *Rocco* articulates these tensions within Visconti, but also captures his nostalgia for a peasant culture that risked disappearance as Italy underwent a vast economic, social, and anthropological transition.

The Seduction of Mimi: *Working-Class Politics after 1968*

The placid Alfa Romeo workers depicted in Visconti's 1960 film would have been difficult to find on Italian screens ten years later. After 1968, when protests by Italian students spread to the factories, passion and action became the watchwords of many workers. Early protests focused on specific labor grievances, as with the agitations for better pensions at the Marzotto textile factory in the Veneto. Soon, however, a generalized culture of revolt took hold that aimed to transform working conditions and, for the most politicized, the relationship between labor and capital. Plant occupations, work slowdowns, and strikes disrupted production inside the factory, while marches and roadblocks brought labor revolts into the public realm. The involvement of regular as well as skilled workers (*operai comuni e operai specializzati*) in these actions changed the aims and composition of the labor movement, and resulted by the early 1970s in a more even wage structure that reflected a greater working-class unity. The unions overcame their own divisions to play a guiding role in the revolts; new labor legislation consolidated their influence on the shop floor (union assemblies were now on the employers' clock) and outside the factories as a political force.³⁷

This culture of revolt, and the gains for the worker movement that came out of it, is much in evidence in Wertmuller's 1972 movie *The Seduction of Mimi*. The Turinese factory where the Sicilian metalworker Mimi is employed (Pirelli or Fiat, according to the script) is rife with agitation. Like many of his fellow Southern transplants, Mimi joins the union and the PCI, and he becomes a loyal party worker, passing out leaflets and attending meetings in the factory canteen. Metalworkers were in fact vanguards of revolutionary activity in those years. The 1969 renewal of the metalworkers' contract had occasioned a strike of one and a half million laborers and support by the unions that cemented the worker-syndicate relationship. Key labor conquests of these years, such as the right to 150 hours of study leave a year, came out of future actions of this sector. By choosing to make her character a metalworker, Wertmuller placed him at the heart of contemporary labor agitations.

Yet Mimi is no working-class hero. Although he flees Mafia-dominated Sicily, he ends up getting his metalworker job through a Mafia boss, setting a precedent for the sacrifice of principle that will be repeated throughout the film. In fact, Mimi's hasty and superficial political education makes him a potentially obedient member of the party rank and file, but also susceptible to extrapolitical influences. These come not from Fiore, an ex-Trotskyist, ex-Maoist militant with whom he has a baby (despite the fact that he has a wife back home), but from his own immersion in and obsession with the realm of the familial. Fiore's pregnancy causes Mimi to distance himself from politics. Although the workers' struggle rages on, he stops going to union meetings, telling his peers that he must "think of his son." The relationship between Fiore and the Northerner Mimi serves Wertmuller, a socialist, to examine how Italian patriarchal and familialist values vitiate revolutionary practice.

The film's second half, which takes place after Mimi's unwanted and Mafia-engineered transfer back to Sicily, adds to this critique a satire of Southern codes of honor. His communist friend (the lone leftist in the village) tells him not to squander an opportunity to educate his townsmen in the art of revolution, but Mimi's energies are entirely consumed by an intricate game of seduction to avenge his wife's impregnation by another man while he was away. Class struggle fades away in front of the task of restoring his wounded honor. "Screw your communism! I'm a cuckold!" he yells at those who urge him to act in a manner befitting one who has lived in the North. By the film's end, saddled with a flock of children who claim he is their father, he has become a strike-banning strong man inside the local factory. In *The Seduction of Mimi*, the family is not a source of consolation and support for the working class, as it is in the Camerini and De Sica works I have examined above. Nor are kinship loyalty and family honor noble if archaic virtues, as they seem to be in Visconti's movie. The family appears here as a repressive institution, not only for women, but for all Italians, since the insular and tribal mentality it favors works against the formation of class allegiances.³⁸

Released in a crucial year of the ongoing labor agitations, Wertmuller's film met with hostility from various quarters: from Italian feminists, who challenged

Fiore's evolution from militant to housewife; from a wide range of Italian leftists, who felt betrayed by what they read as a cynical attitude toward political activism; and by Italian film professionals, who saw her use of humor as a crass bid to commercialize a serious subject. For Wertmuller, though, who often stated that the target audience for her films was the working class, comedy was one arm among others to use in the pursuit of consciousness-raising. *The Seduction of Mimi*, she pointed out in a 1976 interview, had been received best by those to whom it was directed: metalworkers and other laborers, who cheered it on when it opened in Turin.³⁹

Conclusion

This essay has examined four worker-themed films that reflect four important moments in Italian labor history. The early 1930s, the late 1940s, the early 1960s, and the early 1970s were all periods marked by a reconsideration of the relations among politics, economics, and the social realm. Not coincidentally, these dates were also fruitful ones for on-screen reflections about working-class life, and, with the exception of the 1970s, times of heavy censorship. While each film enlightens viewers about the particular aspirations and burdens of workers in its own era, the works I have examined here are linked in several ways. First, stylistic citations and borrowings can be discerned, as can commentaries on earlier films of the genre. Thus the views of Milan filmed from the tram in *Rocco and His Brothers* recall similar footage in *Men, What Rascals They Are!*; both scenes show the temptations of the metropolis for workers with ambitions to social elevation. Second, Italian films on worker themes show the influence of what Gino Bedani has called the "Catholic subculture": a set of discourses and values that have influenced secular attitudes about the self and social institutions in Italy. In recent years, labor historians such as Bedani and Tobias Abse have shown how this subculture gave a particular identity to Italian worker organizations, and Stephen Gundle has shown how the PCI's revolutionary ideology was influenced by familialism and cultural traditionalism.⁴⁰ The worker-themed films that I have examined in this essay bear out these findings. A focus on the family and its constructive and destructive affective ties has served directors to explore the dynamics of power relations and social change over four decades of Italian history.

NOTES

I wish to thank Stephen Gundle for his suggestions and AnneMarie Tamis-Nasello for her research assistance on this essay.

1. Carlo Carotti, *Alla ricerca del Paradiso: l'operaio nel cinema italiano, 1945-1990* (Genoa, 1992), 11.

2. This vision of spectatorship as an active negotiation of meaning on the part of the viewer informs Patricia Mellencamp, "Spectacle and Spectator: Looking Through the American Musical Comedy," in *Explorations in Film Theory*, ed. Ron Burnett (Bloomington, IN, 1991); and Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York, 1994).

3. See on this issue Jacqueline Reich, "Reading, Writing, and Rebellion: Collectivity, Spec-

ularity, and Sexuality in the Italian Schoolgirl Comedy, 1934–43,” in *Mothers of Invention. Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture*, ed. Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis, 1995), 220–254; also Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–45* (Berkeley, 2001), chapter 3.

4. I am referring here to work by Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map. Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, 1992), which deals with Neapolitan silent cinema, and the essays in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley, 1995). For spectatorship in twentieth-century Italy see the sweeping study by Gian Piero Brunetta, *Buio in sala. Cent'anni di passione dello spettatore cinematografico* (Venice, 1989).

5. See the sociological study by Luca Pinna, Malcolm S. MacLean, Jr., and Margherita Guidacci, *Due anni col pubblico cinematografico* (Roma, 1958); also Vittorio Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico. Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia, 1945–65* (Milan, 1974); and Brunetta, *Buio in sala*.

6. On the rise of Fascism and the role of conservative coalitions, see Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power* (London, 1973); also the local studies by Paul Corner, *Fascism in Ferrara* (Oxford, 1974); Alice Kelikian, *Town and Country under Fascism: The Transformation of Brescia, 1915–1926* (Oxford, 1986); Anthony Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism: The Province of Bologna, 1901–1926* (Princeton, 1982).

7. Benito Mussolini, “Quando il mito tramonta,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, December 23, 1921.

8. See Tobias Abse, “Italian Workers and Italian Fascism,” in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, ed. Richard Bessel (Cambridge, 1996), 40–60.

9. See Abse, “The Italian Working Class and Italian Fascism,” for working-class disaffection.

10. I am referring here to works by Maurizio Gribaudi, *Mondo operaio e mito operaio* (Turin, 1987); Victoria de Grazia, *Culture of Consent. Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, 1981) (on the OND); Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, 1987); Perry Willson, *The Clockwork Factory: Women and Work in Fascist Italy* (London, 1993).

11. On Fascist-era film see James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington, IN, 1987); Marcia Landy, *Fascism in Film. The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931–43* (Princeton, 1986); Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*.

12. I am referring here to the workshop committees, which were elected by all workers, not just union members, as well as to the freedom won to engage in political organizing in the factory. On this subject see Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943–1968* (London, 1990), 79–88; and Gino Bedani, *Politics and Ideology in the Italian Worker's Movement. Union Development and the Changing Role of the Catholic and Communist Subcultures in Postwar Italy* (Oxford, 1995), 5–50.

13. Quote and figures from Gian Piero Brunetta, “Il giardino delle delizie e il deserto. Trasformazioni della visione e dei modelli narrativi nel cinema italiano del dopoguerra,” in *Schermi e ombre. Gli italiani e il cinema nel dopoguerra*, ed. Marino Livolsi (Florence, 1988), 46–48. Figures on consumption also culled from Brunetta, “Cattolici e cinema,” in *Il cinema italiano degli anni '50*, ed. Giorgio Tinazzi (Venice, 1979), 307.

14. Figures from Libero Bizzarri, “L'economia cinematografica,” in *La città del cinema. Produzione e lavoro nel cinema italiano 1930–1970* (Rome, 1979), 41. In 1946, eighty-two Italian films were made and competed with 850 imported films, 600 of which were American in provenance. The imbalance was more pronounced by 1948, with fifty-four Italian films competing with 874 foreign features, 668 of which were American. Moreover, that same year only thirteen percent of box-office receipts were for Italian films. See on this Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943–1991* (Durham, NC, 2000).

15. On the Catholic cineforums, see Brunetta, “Cattolici e cinema.”

16. Giulio Preti, “Cultura popolare in che senso,” *Politecnico* 3 (1947); see also Lucio Lombardo Radice, “Cosa leggono i lavoratori,” *Vie nuove* (November 17, 1946), all cited in Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow*, 37–39.

17. On the Communist cinema circles, see Virgilio Tosi, “I circoli di cinema e l'organizzazione del pubblico,” in *Il cinema degli anni '50*, 322–33; also Sandro Zambetti, “I circoli delle associazioni culturali,” in *L'Altro Schermo*, ed. Giovanna Grassi (Venice, 1978), especially 50–52.

18. Vittorio De Sica, “Perche Ladri di biciclette?” *La Fiera Letteraria*, February 6, 1948.

19. See Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton, 1986), 54–75, for an insightful analysis of the importance of the father-son relationship.

20. First and second quotes from Mino Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano* (Rome, 1974), 9, 76. Figures for sales from Gianfranco Casadio, *Adultere, Fedifraghe, Innocenti. La donna del 'neorealismo popolare' nel cinema italiano degli anni Cinquanta* (Ravenna, 1990), 25.

21. Statistics in Brunetta, *Buio in sala*, 275–6.

22. Caretti, *Alla ricerca del Paradiso*, 15.

23. Figures on cinema consumption and production from Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow*; Brunetta, *Buio in sala*, 274; Zambetti, “I circoli delle associazioni culturali,” 50–52. In 1950, Italians spent 1,363 Italian lire for cinema, 156 for theater and music, 129 for sport, 164 for radio and television, and 177 for various other entertainments. By 1960, the contrast was even more marked: 2,418 was spent for cinema, as against 164 for theater and music, 286 for sport, 972 for radio and television, and 414 for other entertainments. Statistics in Marino Livolsi, “Chi va al cinema?” in *Schermi e ombre*, 113.

24. See Pinna, MacLean, and Guidacci, *Due anni col pubblico cinematografico*, ix.

25. Quote from Christian Democrat politician Mariano Rumor, in Bedani, *Politics and Ideology in the Italian Workers Movement*, 59.

26. On the struggles of the 1950s and the vicissitudes of the Italian unions, see Joanne Barkan, *Visions of Emancipation. The Italian Worker Movement Since 1945* (New York, 1995), 36–67; Bedani, *Politics and Ideology in the Italian Worker's Movement*, 53–68.

27. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, 210–253.

28. Barkan, *Visions of Emancipation*, 52.

29. John Foot, “Cinema and the City. Milan and Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 4 (1999):209–235, contends that Visconti's representations of Southerners tend to echo stereotypes about their “uncontrollable” natures.

30. This argument has been advanced most recently by Sam Rohdie, *Rocco and His Brothers* (London, 1992). It is based on Visconti's own statements, primarily “Oltre il fato dei Malavoglia,” *Vie nuove*, October 22, 1960. His fine analysis of the film focuses on the unresolved tensions in the film between melodrama and ideology. On *Rocco* see also Pio Baldelli, *Luchino Visconti* (Milan, 1973); and Guido Aristarco and Gaetano Carancini, eds., “*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*” di Luchino Visconti (Bologna, 1960).

31. For this theme in Visconti's works, see Ugo Finetti, “Il tema della famiglia nell'opera di Visconti,” *Cinema nuovo*, November-December 1969.

32. See Visconti, “Lettera al Ministro su ‘Rocco e i suoi fratelli,’” *L'Unità*, October 24, 1960. On the censorship odyssey of *Rocco*, see Rohdie, *Rocco and His Brothers*, 70; and Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, 170–175. Argentieri is the source for the quotes from the Milan Archdiocese paper *L'Italia* and the Catholic Action newspaper *Quotidiano*.

33. For the first opinion, see Galvano della Volpe's article in *Cinema nuovo*, May-June 1961; for the second, see Guido Aristarco, “Una storia italiana: Rocco e i suoi fratelli,” *Cinema nuovo*, November-December 1960.

34. Visconti, “Oltre il fato dei Malavoglia,” *Vie nuove*, October 22, 1960; Franco Fortini, review in *Cinema nuovo*, January-February 1961; Pier Paolo Pasolini, review in *Vie nuove*, October 1, 1960.

35. Information about the film's profits from Foot, “Cinema and the City”; and Spinazzola, *Cinema and pubblico*, 258.

36. Pinna, MacLean, Guidacci, *Due anni col pubblico cinematografico*.

37. On the revolts of 1968–72, see: Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency* (London, 1990), which focuses on ideology and the culture of revolt among students and workers; Bedani, *Politics and Ideology in the Italian Worker's Movement*, 139–94; Barkan, *Visions of Emancipation*, 68–92; and Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, 209–222.

38. Wertmuller's views on the family as a repressive institution are voiced in “Look Gideon . . . Gideon Bachmann talks with Lina Wertmuller,” *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1977, 6.

39. Wertmuller, in Gina Blumenfeld and Paul McIsaac, “You cannot make the revolution on film,” *Cineaste*, Spring 1976, 7. The film's reception by critics is discussed by John Michalczuk, *The Italian Political Filmmakers* (London, 1986), 244–248. The feminist critique of Wertmuller is summarized in Ellen Willis, “Is Lina Wertmuller Just One of the Boys?” in *Women and the Cinema. A Critical Anthology*, eds. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York, 1977), 377–383. For other representations of workers after 1968, see Carotti, *Alla ricerca del paradiso*, 49–69.

40. See Tobias Abse, “Italy,” in *The Force of Labor*, eds. Stefan Berger and David Broughton (Oxford, 1995), especially 148–151; Bedani, *Politics and Ideology in the Italian Workers Movement*; Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow*.