RECLAIMING REALITIES: THE BOOM, POST-BOOM AND HISTORY FILMS SET IN THE 20TH CENTURY OF ERMANNO OLMI

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RECLAIMING REALITIES: THE BOOM, POST-BOOM, AND HISTORY FILMS
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The self-evident reasons for a work needing to be written on Olmi are plenty: his films have won many major international film festival awards, having Godard proclaim I fidanzati to be one of the ten best films ever made, and being consistently quoted visually by filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Mike Leigh, and Ken Loach. (2008: pg.31)¹. But Olmi’s films can have a very personal significance once an adventurous viewer has discovered them, that invites further viewings. Through Olmi’s singular style, we develop an interest in the characters of his films in a way that beckons us to explore our own selves and our relationships with others.

Acknowledgements

I have been in higher education for almost ten years now. As I receive my Ph.D. at the conclusion of this period, I feel the need to mention those who helped me arrive at this point. Thanks to Sharon Swenson, and Darl Larsen at Brigham Young University for tutoring me and assisting me to find a career that I would enjoy. Thanks to Kristian Moen, Jacqueline Maingard, Sarah Street, Alex Clayton, Angela Piccini, and Helen Piper at the University of Bristol for their support, advice, and helping me iron out some of the kinks in my writing style. Thanks to Christina Lane and William Rothman at the University of Miami for having faith in my potential when I needed to return to the United States to begin all over in another Ph.D. program and for introducing me to Stanley Cavell whose Emersonian philosophy came into my life at a crucial moment. Thanks also to Grace Barnes and John Paul Russo, also at UM, for taking the time to read my dissertation, become more familiar with Olmi, and assisting me during the dissertation process. I am also indebted to my friends and colleagues Oscar Jubis, and Funing Tang for reading my work, discussions about cinema, and suggestions for my teaching and writing styles. Dear family friends, including the Odio and Korshid families, offered support in many different ways. Finally, thanks to my mom and dad for instilling in me an appreciation of the humanities and consistently offering love and encouragement throughout the years.
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Introduction

In *Il tempo si è fermato [Time Stood Still]* (1959), an energy company stations two watchmen, Natale (Natale Rossi), and Roberto (Roberto Seveso), at the site of a hydroelectric dam in the snow-covered Alps at the height of winter. The dam loses electric power when an avalanche occurs and a blizzard follows the evening over the surrounding mountains and valleys. There has been a slight sense of uneasiness about their relationship as they have adjusted to one another because of their difference in age and their perspectives of the world. Natale is older, between his forties and fifties, and Roberto appears to be in his late teens to early twenties. But they learn to adapt to one another and understand that they need to rely on one another, both physically and emotionally.

This newly formed bond demonstrates itself in the moment when, after reaching the shelter, it becomes apparent to the older man that his companion has fallen ill, and Natale returns to their hut to mix-up a traditional remedy. As Roberto falls asleep the lantern they have brought with them loses power and Natale walks over to the altar of the church and lights a candelabrum, revealing a lovely fresco of the Madonna and Infant. There is a mystical ambience in these moments; not anything specifically religious, but a feeling is suggested that whatever love is, and causes it to breed understanding and even compassion between people, has occurred between these two men as signified in the caring acts Natale has just performed and will perform the next morning when he carries Roberto back to their living quarters.
This scene illustrates that Italian director Ermanno Olmi’s interests in simple stories and relationships between average people are not difficult to describe but the effect that his style has on his audience challenges attempts at description. There are many reasons that can be assumed as to why Olmi has been neglected in film studies, (especially in English language film studies) when so many Italian directors have been deemed worthy of more attention.

Ideologically, Olmi’s films have never committed themselves as directly as the work of several of his contemporary compatriot filmmakers such as Pasolini, Bertolucci, or Bellocchio. And although several of his films do feature nudity and examine sexuality, sex is never the predominant concern of his films. For foreign audiences who had been introduced to Italian art cinema through post 8 ½ (1963) Fellini and Blowup (1966), since the 1960s art house cinema had become earmarked as a place where audiences could occasionally see increasingly explicit representations of sex without feeling they had changed their viewing standards. And as will be discussed in the following chapters, Olmi makes no secret of his interest in religion and spirituality (at times thoroughly investigating, in an uncomfortable manner for some, difficult concepts such as prophecy, the divinity or non-divinity of Christ, the nature of faith, etc.) and this could certainly have contributed to certain circles within academia regarding him suspiciously.

But none of these reasons would be adequate to explain Olmi’s relative absence in the film canon as other Italian filmmakers have risen to prominence in critical esteem during this period without displaying their political standpoints so openly or focusing so heavily on the explicit sexuality that was now accepted in the post-
I would propose that Olmi was relatively excluded from North American film canons of Italian cinema because understanding their effects requires close readings.

**A Brief Background on Olmi**

Olmi was born in Bergamo, near Milan, in 1931. His mother descended from a family of farmers and his father from railway men. Olmi dropped out of school early and never attended a formal university. However, he was interested in drama and after being employed at Edisonvolta, an Italian energy company, he became part of their theater group and was later given a camera to film documentaries about the company and its activities. Many of these films are currently available online and demonstrate a keen interest in capturing the humanity of the workers involved in the company's projects. Several of them
even experiment with the formal elements of storytelling through film (as can be
seen in the first chapter's section on Il Posto). His first feature Il tempo si è
fermato, began as a documentary for Edisonvolta and then turned into a fictional
work. With his second feature, Il posto, he became internationally recognized
and also had the good fortune of meeting his wife, Loredana Detto, who plays
one of the film’s protagonists. Several of his other features have won major
awards, although it has been many years since any of his films were released
theatrically in the United States or the United Kingdom. Although in 2006 he
claimed to be retiring from fictional features to focus solely on documentaries, in
2011 he released Il villagio di cartone, starring Michael Lonsdale and Rutger
Hauer, and at the time of this writing he is finishing a fictional film that is
reportedly set during the First World War.

A Gaping Hole in Film Studies

The self-evident reasons for a work needing to be written on Olmi are
plenty: his films have won many major international film festival awards, having
Godard proclaim I fidanzati to be one of the ten best films ever made, and being
consistently quoted visually by filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Mike Leigh,
and Ken Loach. (2008: pg.31)². But Olmi’s films can have a very personal
significance once an adventurous viewer has discovered them, that invites
further viewings. Through Olmi’s singular style, we develop an interest in the

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² Olmi, Ermanno. Interview with Daniela Padoan. Il sentimento della realtà. Milan, Italy: Editrice
characters of his films in a way that beckons us to explore our own selves and our relationships with others.

After becoming acquainted with Olmi myself and beginning to study Neo-Realism more thoroughly, I felt that I had identified the reason I have always been interested in films: they assist me in understanding reality, other people and myself. The characters in Olmi’s films also realize this as he explores love and relationships visually without ever instructively explaining what they are or why they are valued. Olmi expresses ideas about these subjects in ways that cannot be completely described in words but need to be witnessed. After stumbling upon Olmi, his ability to examine people in this fashion led to my commitment to learning more about him and his other films.

After learning Italian on my two year Latter-day Saint mission in Italy and returning home, I found myself in an undergraduate film history class. Like every undergraduate film major, I thought I knew everything there was to know about cinema through my familiarity with most of the films at the local Blockbuster video rental store. But once I opened my Oxford History of World Cinema, there were pages and pages on films and filmmakers about whom I knew nothing. Netflix had just entered the DVD rental business and I filled my queue with the movies of Italian directors whose names were mentioned favorably so that I could both practice the language I just learned and simultaneously begin to bulk up on academic film knowledge. I loved many of the Italian films I watched but none of them matched the experience of watching The Tree of Wooden Clogs. After watching it, I wrote a commitment to myself regarding my desire to change the
world around me. While this moment was certainly charged with an enthusiastic naive idealism, it was a powerful experience that incited a serious personal investigation of what I felt was important in life. At this point the only other film of Olmi’s that I had watched was *I fidanzati* and the rest of his films were not available online. When I was accepted into BYU’s film program, I had not set out to focus on film studies. When I happened upon Olmi, film studies’ value became readily apparent. I immediately wanted to learn more about him but there were no books in my university’s library or listed on Internet bookstores. Once I decided to do graduate level film studies I felt like I had my topic: I would be able to turn my own research on Olmi into a dissertation and then a book.

Why would anybody want to read about Ermanno Olmi today? A book on Olmi and his work is perhaps more relevant today in the age of digital and liquid media that can be made and consumed anywhere. Anyone who has access to a digital camera can make a movie, but the essential questions budding filmmakers
should ask themselves are often ignored: why make movies? Who is going to watch my movie and how will they participate with it? Student filmmakers rarely ask themselves these questions or desire to bravely investigate reality in the people and the world around them, as students are encouraged to do at the Ipotesi [Hypothesis] Cinema School founded by Olmi in 1982[^3]. I do not have any pretenses that this project will either immediately place Olmi’s name alongside Rossellini, Fellini and, Visconti as undisputed masters of Italian cinema or that it will actually be used primarily to help someone make their film. The reason I mention Olmi as a possible example for aspiring filmmakers is to propose that the films he has made have been completed with relatively small budgets and they still win recognition at major film festivals.

**Neo-Realism, Bazin, and Olmi**

The Italian arts have explored the concept of reality and ontology at least since the Renaissance. Several scholars have connected Neo-Realism’s depiction of reality both with naturalist and realist authors like Giovanni Verga, and more ancienctly with artists such as Dante. In her essay “Back to the Future: Dante and the languages of Post-war Italian film”, Marguerite R. Waller boldly connects this cinematic tradition with a renaissance author. “It is becoming well known among Italianists that Dante’s inquiry into, map of, and inoculation against most of the signifying possibilities we creatures of discourse have created in the West has offered filmmakers, no less than writers, a remarkably rich discursive

universe in terms of which to locate themselves”. She continues, suggesting the difficulties in convincing scholars in other fields, “…That the languages of Italian cinema, however they may participate in the movements, strategies, or periods associated with ‘modernism’, or ‘post-modernism,’ also problematize such insulating categories through their consistent engagement with Dante’s great fourteenth-century experiment.” (2004: pg. 74)

In his notes to The Divine Comedy Robin Kirkpatrick suggests that Dante depicts Hell (i.e. suffering) as an experience that partly occurs because we fail to look closely at reality. He states of the first nine lines of Canto III, that depicts the gateway to hell,

The originality of Dante’s treatment of Hell may be gauged by comparing these lines… with visual representations such as Giotto’s in the Scrovegni chapel at Padua or in the mosaics of the Baptistery. Where, traditionally Hell is pictured as chaos, violence, and ugliness, Dante sees a vision of terrifying order expressing the underlying structure of a world that God has created but sinners have refused to contemplate. Hell Gate is not simply an awe inspiring threat, but a demand that intelligence and understanding should be

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5 The lines referred to are written on the Gate of Hell: “Through me you go to the grief-wracked city./ Through me to everlasting pain you go./ Through me you go and pass among lost souls./ Justice inspired my exalted creator./ I am a creature of the holiest power./ of Wisdom in the highest and of Primal Love./ Nothing till I was made was made, only/ eternal beings. And I endure eternally./ Surrender as you enter every hope you have” (2012: pg. 12). Citation Below.

I find it specifically relevant that Dante proposed that we suffer because we fail to see what is real. This idea suggests that Olmi’s interest in exploring reality reaches beyond the 20th and 21st centuries and engages with a topic that has been part of Italian discourse at least since the 1300s. Therefore it should not surprise us that the films that emerged out of post-fascist Italy staked such strong claims to reality and formally challenge the way we would think about reality and film. 

The Neo-Realist cycle of films from Italy in the immediate aftermath of World War II are arguably the most influential group of films in the history of cinema. Nearly every cinematic art movement that has appeared since has, either in form or content, been inspired by its methods of viewing the world. Looking back at Il tempo si è fermato, Olmi obviously wanted to emulate his favorite filmmakers from Neo-Realism, especially Rossellini. Though many film scholars have debated what makes a Neo-Realist film ‘Neo-Realist’, Olmi was familiar with (and adopted all of), the filmmaking methods that one commonly associates with these films when he made his film in 1959: non-professional actors, location shooting, social concerns, etc. And as the styles of the leading figures of Neo-Realism adapted to the culture abruptly changing around them, Olmi’s style was forming and he was ready to offer a singular vision in accord with the ethos of the Neo-Realist films. 

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Olmi’s style continues what I believe to have been the mission of Neo-Realism as suggested by André Bazin when he wrote of the works of Rossellini, De Sica, Fellini, and Zavattini. When Bazin wrote that the filmmakers of Umberto D. (1952) “…Are concerned to make cinema the asymptote of reality”, he was suggesting that the cinema can augment our understanding of the world and others (1972: pg. 82)\(^7\). Bazin’s approach to these films, and his understanding of the cinema as a whole, has been viewed as naïve, many scholars often disregarding his perspective on films beyond a convenient opposition to Eisenstein’s editing theory or as an inexperienced critic who believed that film actually recorded objective reality. Both of these perspectives of this essential approach to thinking about the viewer’s experience of watching a movie have greatly limited film studies insights into the film medium. However, recently Bazin has been highlighted as a figure worthy of redeeming that may offer the field additional paths in discussing the ever-expanding visual arts field\(^8\).

In order to provide an understanding of Olmi that manifests why he is worthy of study, throughout the following chapters I hope to approach Olmi’s work in the light of Bazin’s interpretations of Neo-Realism. In his book length response to Bazin’s query “What is Cinema?”, Dudley Andrews defines what his own and Bazin’s interpretation of cinema is. “The Cinema goes forward encountering traces of a larger world; and it goes forward as a memory machine adjusting “itself” to what it has become in this process of discovery and engagement with another subject, whether person, culture, temporality.” (2010: 101)


\(^8\) For examples see the entire issue devoted to Bazin of *Film International*. 5.6 (2007).
Following this comprehension of what films do and can provide to us as viewers, Neo-Realism and, (for this project’s purposes), Olmi’s films are uniquely designed for these explicit reasons. Therefore we can arrive at a deeper analysis of ourselves, our relationships to others, and the world by looking closely and thinking deeply about these films.

**Olmi Within the context of Authorship, Italian Studies, and Philosophy**

A project treating the bulk of a director’s work is obligated to specify its understanding of auteurism. Claiming that a filmmaker is an auteur suggests that the critic is accepting as *prima facie* that film is an art and that there is still a need to understand cinema as the work of an author or a creator of a text. Auteurism has been contested since the Cahiers du Cinema critics in France first made claims for the existence of the auteur, soon followed by Andrew Sarris in the United States. Barry Keith Grant writes that “…Despite the seismic changes in critical fashion during the past half century, auteurism – at its most basic, the idea that there is an author to a film – has been central to the historical development of both popular film culture and serious film criticism and theory. Aspects of auteurism have overlapped with virtually every subsequent critical theory and paradigm.” (2008: pg. 1) The auteur theory has proved itself to be one of the more enduring pillars of film studies, surviving the cultural waves that have run through Western academia during the last sixty years. Even if its not accepted in

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all of the theories that have followed in its wake, it must still be addressed and
answered for.

Because studios have adopted the strategy of marketing a film as the
work of a creator, it may be easier to convince an average film-goer of the values
of the auteur theory than it would be to discuss its merits with certain scholars in
film studies. However, since the theory developed, filmmaking and film studies
became a university discipline, one from which even most mainstream Hollywood
feature filmmakers entered the business. For example, in her article on Kathryn
Bigelow, Christina Lane writes that the director “Cites Andrew Sarris and Peter
Wollen as her most influential advisors, which suggests that she is not only
schooled in auteurist theories but probably has a stake in presenting herself as
an auteur.” (1998: pg. 62)\(^\text{11}\) Of course, Bigelow’s case is exceptional both in that
not every director who graduates from film school was able to learn directly from
two of the most influential writers on the auteur theory and not every director has
the type of command of the medium that she possesses nor the capability to
explore his/her interests as she can.

As a European director that has made films for the art house market,
claiming Olmi’s status as an auteur will be less questionable in many circles in
the field than if I were to make arguments for, as examples, Ron Howard or Ben
Affleck as auteurs. Despite such acceptance, it is imperative to express my
understanding of what an auteur is and my reasons for staking authorship claims
for Olmi, providing evidence and plenty of examples from closely read

\(^{11}\) Lane Christina. “From “The Loveless to Point Break”: Kathryn Bigelow’s Trajectory in Action.”
sequences. My project will also benefit from approaching Olmi through Italian studies and philosophy.

It seems that when scholars outside film studies write about film, they have no problem accepting the idea of the auteur. They seem to be content to let film scholars wage battles over the value this concept has specifically for the visual arts. In what is arguably the most influential book on the subject, A History of Italian Cinema, Italian studies scholar Peter Bondanella discusses a wide range of films, the bulk of which are made by canonically recognized filmmakers after World War II. He even discusses, albeit briefly in what amounts to two pages covering three decades, including many, but not all, of Olmi’s later works. But most of the treatment Olmi’s films receive here is plot summaries, mostly lacking value judgments, concluding on a negative note about what was planned to be Olmi’s last feature film, Centochiodi. Bondanella writes, “Although this film has high aesthetic qualities, Olmi’s ultimate image, captured by the ex-professor’s remark that a single cup of coffee with a friend is more valuable than all the books in the world, unfortunately panders to the rampant anti-intellectualism prevalent not only in Italy but in the rest of the world of moviegoers” (2009: pg. 512). In a book treating the entire history of a national cinema, Bondanella cannot be expected to delve too deeply into each film he discusses, but the possibility could have been raised that this may have been the expansion of a theme that prioritizes humanity and relationships above all else. But at least Bondanella has attempted to be comprehensive in his inclusion of these films as part of Italy’s cinematic history. Most English language Italian

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studies scholars, like their film studies colleagues, have only discussed the *palme d’or* winner and the two big sixties films with which Olmi achieved a relative amount of fame.

My approach to Olmi will also be assisted by m Stanley Cavell’s approach to film. There are a number of connections between Cavell and Bazin. Bazin came of age in an era when the idea of phenomenology was first taking root in France through Bergson. Bergson and Cavell are both fervent admirers of Emerson, who in many ways, I see as essential to the development of the philosophies that would influence Neo-Realism and continue into Olmi’s cinema. When Emerson states in his essay “The American Scholar”, “One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, “He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry out the wealth of the Indies.” There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion”, the philosophy behind an artist’s need to make visions of reality continually anew is implied prior to the recognized beginning of modernism and Baudelaire’s watershed essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (2004: pg.55). My emphasis in exploring these philosophical ideas will imply that Olmi’s continual theme of seeing the world and our relationships to others in it is linked to historical traditions that have explored questions of reality and the world.

My methodological approach will be to employ close textual readings of individual films, while considering their relation to Italian history, other similarly

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styled Italian films, and secondary literature in film studies. This will be done in three chapters covering a selection of around half of Olmi’s feature length fictional films.

The first chapter will concentrate on the films that are set during the Economic Boom. These include *Il tempo si è fermato*, *Il posto*, and *I fidanzati*. Olmi’s interpretations of the changes wrought by the economic boom are wound up in the lives of regular Italians and the effects the rapid influx of modernity is having on their relationships and their understandings of the world. One element of Olmi’s style that I will begin to explore in this chapter, and continue to investigate throughout the other chapters, is the formal investigation of time that begins with *Il tempo si è fermato* and that radically takes shape in *I fidanzati*. Olmi is the only Italian director of this era that I know of to mix past, present, future, and imagination through editing. Antonioni and Rossellini also investigate time but with different methods. Olmi’s style incorporates innovative ways of thinking about time that seem to have entered into modern Italian culture after WWII as a form of questioning the past’s reign over the present.

The films set in the Post-Economic Boom period, including *Un certo giorno* [*One Fine Day*] (1969), *Durante l’estate* [*In the Summertime*] (1971), and *La circostanza* [*The Circumstance*] (1974) will be the focus of the second chapter. These three films display the drastic changes to Italian family life, business, and society forged after the initial effects of the boom had run their course. Two of them (*Un certo Giorno* and *La Circostanza*) predominately use the style perfected in *I fidanzati* and the third still uses it, but sparingly. The adults in these
films have had a decade or more to adjust to the economic prosperity and new social classes they have joined after entering white-collar work when the boom arrived. However, all of the younger characters were born into a world where most of them will be able to enter white-collar work through education and will only know manual or agricultural labor from stories of their ancestors. The films in this chapter examine the anxiety of both generations in dealing with the changes outlined above.

The third chapter will investigate Olmi’s twentieth century history films. Almost every major post-WWII Italian director made a number of films that explore history, perhaps the most notable of these being Rossellini who only wanted to make history films in the latter part of his career. Olmi’s three set around 1900 and before the boom include È venne un uomo [A Man Named John] (1965), I recuperanti [The Recuperators] (1970), and L’albero degli zoccoli [The Tree of Wooden Clogs] (1978) In Olmi’s history films, we are invited to be participants in piecing together history. In her examination of the Hollywood historical epic, Vivian Sobchack writes “If the “content of the form” of the Hollywood historical epic is the mimetic and onomatopoetic representation of antecedent human actions, then the “theme of the form” is temporal magnitude – extended and elevated to its highest existential degree as intelligible within a particular cultural framework.” (2012: pg. 343)14 Because of Olmi’s temporal shifting style and his expectation of his audience to partner with him in shaping reality, his history films are more involving in piecing together current social and

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14 Sobchack, Vivian. ““Surge and Splendor”: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic.” Film Genre Reader IV. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 2012. Print. [Italics are her emphasis].
cultural issues, with an eye turned towards representing and reflecting on the way in which these same issues were dealt with in the past, than most of the films of which Sobchack writes and most history films in general.
Chapter One: The Trilogy of the Boom

Il tempo si è fermato

Midway through the twentieth century, Italy found itself in an anomalous situation. Although the West still regards Italian contributions to the humanities and sciences during the renaissance as leading lights on the road to modernity, the country failed to keep pace with the rest of Western culture later on. As Robert Casillo and John Paul Russo note in The Italian in Modernity:

Although much recent scholarship has questioned Burckhardt's characterization of Italy as the 'first-born' of the modern world, there can be little doubt that late medieval and Renaissance Italy made major contributions to modernity as evidenced by the commercial revolution, humanism, political theory, the scientific mentality, the language of the visual arts, and social refinement. By the eighteenth century, however, Italy's fortunes had fallen so far that, having ceased to be in the vanguard of the west, it was nearly bringing up the rear, its place taken by England, France, and Germany.\(^\text{15}\)

Between the 1700s and the late 1950s, Italy remained behind the more fiscally successful countries of Europe in many fundamental aspects. Significantly high unemployment rates led thousands of immigrants to leave for America and

Northern Europe for over thirty years in search of a better life. Many of those fortunate enough to have employment worked in low-wage, highly physical labor. As Italian historian Paul Ginsborg states, at the middle of the century Italy “Was little changed, outside of its major cities, since the time of Garibaldi and Cavour. It was still predominately a peasant country, of great and unspoiled natural beauty, of sleepy provincial cities, of enduring poverty, especially in the South, of rural culture and local dialects.” (2003: pg.1)\(^\text{16}\) Industrialization did not fully appear in the nation until 1958, the beginning of the economic boom. Life all over Italy underwent sudden, visible changes as Italian cities demonstrated signs of new prosperity and trickled into more provincial areas. Ermanno Olmi witnessed many of these alterations first-hand, working for the Edison-Volta electric company first and then given a camera to make films for the company, he completed a number of documentaries and docudramas about work related to the industrialization of the country and the workers themselves. Olmi’s first feature length narrative, *Il tempo si è fermato* (1959) [*Time Stood Still*] (which began as one of these documentaries), observes the initial appearance of rapid economic growth and fresh world perspectives into one of the most rural of locations: a security post in the Italian Alps observing a hydroelectric dam.

After the film transformed into a fictional narrative from what ostensibly began as a documentary, Olmi chose non-professional actors for his two protagonists Natale (Natale Rossi) and Roberto (Roberto Seveso): the former a worker in the Val Camonica and the latter a student that worked near the

director’s Edison-Volta employer, (2003: pg. 39)\textsuperscript{17}. It features only three actors seen on camera, one of them only during the first eight minutes. The film centers on the evolving relationship between two men over a couple of days in the heart of winter. Its story is simple and rather uneventful. Salvetti (Paolo Guadrubbi), Natale’s original co-worker, departs and Roberto arrives as a substitute for Salvetti’s replacement as the replacement’s wife is giving birth. An avalanche occurs soon after Roberto’s arrival and Natale and Roberto stay in a church overnight after the barracks they are based in loses power. At the church, Natale brews up a remedy of milk and brandy when Roberto comes down with a fever. The next morning as Natale carries Roberto back up to the barracks on his back the film concludes when they enter their re-powered quarters.

Although the temporally shifting editing style that would become a staple through most of Olmi’s work does not appear yet, *Il tempo si è fermato* showcases other frequently used formal techniques. Accordingly, the interests that would remain with Olmi throughout his career are already discernable here and in the short documentaries and docudramas that he had made previously. The most vivid of these (e.g. *La pattuglia del passo San Giacomo* [1954], *Tre fili fino a Milano* [1958]) address conflicts presented by cultural encounters, through modernity’s sudden intrusion and the resulting adaptation to its effects, which Olmi consistently revisits.

When the film introduces us to Natale, it is immediately apparent that he has faintly encountered modernity through the industrial world. We observe him

skiing around the dam, a man made construction whose appearance was
designed to correspond with the grandeur of the mountains that surround it
(image 1). This contrast between the natural landscape and the developments of
humanity fittingly provides the background to the beginning of the feature film
career of one of the world’s most spiritually-concerned filmmakers. There are
dozens of books and essays devoted to the relationship between landscape and
Italian cinema, specifically Neo-Realism. However, none of these discuss
Olmi’s cinema even though the environment plays just as crucial a role in forming
individuals in his works as in the earlier Neo-Realist films.

Certainly, the background or environments of stories have been of crucial
importance in the formation of personages and characters in stories since the
beginning of human history, namely global creation myths. In *The Solace of
Fierce Landscapes*, Belden Lane discusses the spiritual effects that
environments have had in these stories and through history. “The long, silent

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18 Some of the best include Mark Shiel’s *Italian Neo-Realism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City* and Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn’s essay ‘The open image: poetic realism and the New Iranian Cinema’. The latter explains how the neo-realist depiction of space has influenced international cinema.
contemplation of a vast, indifferent terrain has been shown, throughout human experience, to be a powerful force in subverting self-consciousness, pushing the outer edges of language, evoking the deepest desire of the human heart for untamed mystery and beauty. In Neo-Realism, film and culture scholars have given due attention to the pertinency of the environment on the formation of the individuals in its films. Italy’s cities consistently remind their occupants of the past, while the country’s varying landscapes reiterate the indifference of the natural world to this past; both a solemn and comforting thought for Italians and their imaginings of the future. The appropriateness of the location in Il tempo si è fermato stems from the contrast between tradition and industrialization that becomes revealed in the relationship between the two leads. It also serves as a space where a divinely approved synthesis seems to occur when the realization that this new culture accompanying the economic boom has not substantially transformed human nature and that Natale will need to adapt and welcome this world if he desires to escape alienation from the rest of society.

Natale, whose very name signifies his ties to tradition (Natale means Christmas in Italian), appears to be in his forties. In many ways he embodies Ginsborg’s assessment, made above, of Italians of the era: he speaks in dialect and treasures his local culture. He does not seem to be bothered by his seclusion in the mountains but through the duration of the film he reveals his anxiety regarding the cultural shifts he has begun to notice at home. Natale’s job assignment, located at this isolated observational point, symbolizes his wish to

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remain in an unchanged state, for time to stand still. Despite his feelings towards these changes, he reveals himself to be a clever *bricoleur*, adapting to the world with what he has at hand when the need to do so arises.

We first glimpse this tendency as he speaks with Salvetti upon re-entering their barracks following his observational trip around the dam. Salvetti explains that it is December 22nd and that he will be vacationing until January 18th. As he checks the calendar, Natale makes his way to his makeshift freezer: from the window ledge outside, he brings in a crate marked “contiene esplosivo” (contains explosives). Natale unpacks the box to reveal a slab of meat that he is preparing to cook (image 2). The dam, Mother Nature, and a line of cable used to send items up and down the mountain provide Natale with living essentials. He abides cozily in his cabin with as little human contact as possible. Witnessing the clever devices he employs to survive and make himself comfortable, we can conceive that he would be fine, and content, to live alone in the Alps for the rest of his life, forgetting about the rest of the world and any further progress civilization makes.

When Natale returns to the kitchen area, he tells his co-worker that he thinks he will get bored during his time off. While he packs his things, Salvetti informs Natale that he is headed to Gênes (Genoa) where there are so many people that he does not notice the passage of time. He lists off the different kinds of people and wonders he will enjoy: people of all races, cinematographs (we can

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20 December 22nd (La 22 Dicembre) was also the name of the production group behind this film. It was based in Milan and 51 percent owned by Edisonvolta. Olmi, already working for the company’s theater group, helped set-up this arm of the company’s film productions. It would later finance *i fidanzati* and the Roberto Rossellini produced *The Iron Age* when the famed director could find no other backing. See Gallagher, Tag. The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini: His Life and Films. New York: Da Capo Press, 1998. Print. Pg.560.
understand this term as movie theatres or people making films), and the city lit up at night so that it appears to be daylight. Indeed, time will fly within the city, where change occurs and crowds of people create a dynamic sense of living that does not exist in this desolate location.

Preparing his food and drawing water from a container he had placed outside, Natale appears unimpressed or indifferent to these marvels of the big city, unconvincingly stating his surprise. Salvetti’s descriptions of the city indicate that the economic boom is in full swing and its cultural impact has already impressed him: modernity is lurking just outside of this seemingly unreachable valley. The people mentioned in this dialogue suggest that the city has become a transforming space, in which contact is made with new ideas, inventions, and lifestyles.

The cinematograph also brings the city’s population into contact with the unfamiliar. Cinema’s role in bringing the world everywhere at anytime accompanied the modifications brought about by modernity. Francesco Casetti
reminds us of this particular role of the cinema in the age of modernity stating "Film gave us a script for reading the modern experience: it not only proposed a reading of that experience, but at times imposed a pattern for its expression and communication."(2008: 5) But Natale’s mode of communication has not yet updated to keep up with these fresh patterns emerging with modernity. His only communication with the world besides the telephone in the barracks’ kitchen is the radio. As the economic boom continued, televisions would light up homes in the next decade and further bind culturally distant Italians together by utilizing the national language for programs rather than dialects. But for Natale, the people Salvetti describes may as well be characters from a fictional story. He has no visual engagement with them and has not yet met any representatives of the cultural developments that have already sprung up in the wake of the boom.

For roughly the next nine minutes of the film, Natale is observed doing the chores of the house, setting up a trap for a hare, preparing dinner, and then just sitting at a table waiting. After he has finished cooking the food and set the table, he places a plate on top of some food he has prepared for Salvetti’s replacement to keep it warm. We see a close-up of a boiling pot, followed by a close-up of a clock (image 3). During the sequence while Natale is in the kitchen cooking, preparing the table and waiting we can hear the ticking of this clock. The proceeding shot lasts just under a minute. During this time Natale stares out the window, and then sits down and fiddles with the water from the pot on the stove. When the clock stops ticking this lengthy take ends and a close-up of Natale’s

face turning reveals his dependency on the object to reassure him of time’s passing (image 4). Natale quickly arises and winds it back up and then sits down again and waits. He is content to allow time to pass and survive on just getting by, accustoming himself to small changes in his vicinity. But in these moments while he remains alone, besides the lack of companionship, we notice that he is missing something that provides his life with meaning.

This moment’s importance may not stand out during a first viewing, but it is extremely relevant both to the ideas and feelings that are expressed during the film and to the rest of Olmi’s oeuvre. The idea of time standing still appears in all
of the works that will be discussed here. As stated earlier, Olmi had not yet
developed the formal editing structure that would complicate our ability to
temporally locate the separated lovers of I fidanzati. But the film’s long takes and
Natale’s isolation exhibit Olmi’s interest in time and the ideas civilization has
formed about it during the twentieth century. Even though Natale has
purposefully secluded himself to be out of time, he is aware that time passes
because he knows that something in the world is changing around him. As
philosopher Sydney Shoemaker states, “We are all possessed of a ‘sense of
time’, an ability to judge fairly accurately the length of intervals of time, at least of
short intervals, without using any observed change as a standard; one can tell
whether the second hand of a clock is slowing down without comparing its
movements with those of another clock…” He continues that this consideration
suggests “It is logically impossible for someone to know that nothing, including
the state of his own mind, is changing, i.e. for someone to be aware of the
existence of a changeless interval during that interval itself.” (1993: pg. 67)
Although Natale may appear fine by himself, he still requires basic social
interaction to either fill time or to build relationships not only for psychological
stability but perhaps to show and feel love. In the scene described above,
something occurs internally when he feels time has completely stopped. He may
want to confirm time’s passing if only to hope he will outlive the requirement to
come to terms with the new world that has appeared with the boom. But with

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Roberto’s arrival, Natale is obliged to address new lifestyles and worldviews that his younger co-worker will bring up the mountain.

Roberto startles Natale when he appears. He informs his new companion that the wife of Pedrazzini, the scheduled replacement, gave birth and so he has been assigned to take his place. He is a much younger man, late teens to early twenties. As he sets to unpacking his luggage, he immediately annoys his co-worker by making the bed squeak and nailing a shelf to the wall. Natale’s face displays the irritation that he feels towards this newcomer disturbing his routines and silence. Following an awkward dinner exchange in which Roberto reveals that he does not drink alcohol, the men call it a night and go to their bunks. The next morning, Natale partakes in his morning rituals while Roberto sleeps in: shaving, putting his sweater on, and calls to report in on the status of the dam, the temperature, and the weather conditions. During the call, Natale cracks a joke about the boy sent up “not being right”, because he abstains from alcohol. Aspects of the younger man’s personality, such as not drinking alcohol, are incomprehensible to Natale and during their dinner when this fact was revealed no attempt to discuss the matter was made but Natale avoided any kind of confrontation with the younger man’s approach to living.

After finishing his breakfast, Natale walks to the bottom of the dam whistling a cheerful tune. As he enters a doorway below the dam, a thundering noise startles him and he looks back at the barracks with terror, perhaps expecting that an avalanche has occurred (image 5). He runs back up the hill with urgency until he realizes that it is only a rock n’ roll record (sung in poor
English). After Natale sets aside his fears he returns to the area below the dam. Roberto dances inside the kitchen and continues singing along with the song and cavorting around as he prepares his breakfast. Roberto also reveals that he is something of a bricoleur as well when, while he dances and eats, he makes a dart out of a nail and a small slip of paper for the dartboard drawn on the wall of the barracks. A cut is made to reveal the record player, but at an askew angle. The shot then adjusts itself, turning to display the player right side up (images 6 & 7). The twisting camera angle of the record player signals an individual
response from both characters, each from a generational perspective. For Roberto, the movement of the camera along with the spinning record assists in visualizing an attraction to the pace of an Italy that is shifting its culture and economy in ways that appeal to this youthful student. Earlier in the film, a jazz inflected score had accompanied Natale’s routines and the programs he selects on the radio have noticeably not been tinged with the new music entering the country from the United States and Britain. The soundtrack intimates that the older worker ceased to develop his musical tastes after a certain point and has no intention of adjusting for rock ‘n’ roll, demonstrated by his dismissive gestures when he walks back under the dam. To him Roberto’s record, and by association the younger man’s cultural taste, is just disturbing noise.

They spend the next day and a half getting to know each other, Natale accommodating himself to his brash companion as they play checkers and chase after a rabbit. But following a nearby avalanche they discover that the power has gone out and will not be fixed until the next morning. After dinner, because of a fierce winter storm outside, they decide to bring their bedding into the kitchen
next to the fire they have constructed to cook with inside the stove. They retire to their beds and Natale commences to read a book, *Il cuore* (The Heart), which catches the eye of Roberto. Roberto lets Natale know he has read the book as well by repeatedly stating how beautiful and moving it is. Natale finally responds by saying that it is full of beautiful things that “Could never happen these days. It’s another world.” Roberto replies that his dad says the same thing too but that he does not agree because he thinks the world is “Always the same.”

As this conversation continues, Natale reveals that he thinks that men are no longer men because they do not sense the necessity of defending their honor. To provide evidence of how the world has changed, he describes a traditional childhood belief that the baby Jesus brought children presents at Christmas time. He was crushed when he learned that this was not the case. However, prior to arriving at the observation station for the present stay, his seven year-old son asked him for a pair of ski boots. Natale told the boy that if he behaved himself the baby Jesus would bring him the boots, but the boy said “What baby? If you don’t have any money the baby won’t bring anything.” This telling conversation reveals the reasoning behind Natale’s comfort in his work-enforced solitude and his aloofness towards Roberto when they first encounter one another. He was able to accept the cultural and societal alterations brought about until the recent present but not the profuse social transformations brought about by the boom, even to his family’s home.

When the stove fire burns out, they decide to blow the light out and attempt to sleep. The wind howling outside and rattling against the little shelter
provided by their living quarters, combined with the cold, keeps Roberto awake. Natale suggests that they head down to the church where the wind blows less strongly. They promptly dress themselves again and gather their blankets before braving the storm outside. Once at the church, they make beds from some decorated wood paneling. After they have lain down, (in another example of the repeated motif of the necessity of adaptation for survival) Natale tells Roberto that the church was constructed during the Second World War and that bullets make up its chandeliers.

When Natale turns the flashlight off so they can sleep, Roberto reveals that he feels ill, perhaps a fever coming on, through some anxious questions about what happens to workers who are sick. In an act of compassion, trudging through the storm, Natale returns to the barracks to gather materials to prepare a healing concoction for his young friend. At the church once again, he builds a fire to boil together some milk (and with some deliberation because he knows Roberto is a teetotaler), with a touch of brandy. After Roberto consumes the drink along with a medicinal tablet, the flashlight loses power. Natale walks over to a candelabrum resting on the altar of the church and lights the first candle. The light reveals a beautiful mural depicting the Madonna holding the infant Jesus in her arms. After looking back at Roberto he decides to light the rest of the candles of the candelabrum and pauses for a moment in reflection of the painting (image 8). He walks off screen and the camera also takes in the pleasing scene for a few moments, allowing us to approach, if we are so inclined, a type of transcendence alongside Natale.
Often those who have written about Olmi ascribe a dogmatic Catholicism to the
director, assuming that in his depictions of religious imagery, ideas or stories, he
allows his faith to intrude at times (it would certainly not be unreasonable to
believe such judgments may be one of the reasons Olmi has been relatively
neglected). For example, in John Gillett’s review of this film in *Sight and Sound*,
the critic gives a mostly favorable critique of Olmi’s first feature, but has some
complaints regarding the scene described above. He states, “Although Olmi
makes the most of this setting photographically and emotionally, for me the last
scenes are marred by a whiff of Catholic sentimentalism, a hint of that self-
consciousness so carefully avoided everywhere else.” (1961: pg. 94)\(^{23}\)

Dismissing this scene is a mistake, because in doing so, Olmi’s talent for alluding
to the transcendent without permitting his own faith to dominate readings of this
moment, and moments similar to this in the rest of his work, is completely
neglected. What enables this scene to be transcendent is not dependent on
Catholicism, but rather ideas discussed and treated in the film regarding the

approach of modernity and the world changing or remaining the same, and finally
love being eternally capable of bridging together opposing visions of the world.

Although the director provided these thoughts years after this sequence
was created, the scene provides evidence that Olmi already held this philosophy
in at least a foundational form. Asked about his religious perspective in an
interview, Olmi replied “My transgression is not in denying, but more so in
affirming my love relationship with God, or with Christ. I love Christ more than
God, I love men more than God, because I believe if He is somewhere in the
cosmos, He would want this.” (2008: pg. 11)²⁴ This commitment to unconditional
love shines through the scene’s imagery and the budding friendship. As we stare
at the mural with the knowledge that it was created during, in many regards, the
20th century’s most devastating event, the image of the Madonna with child
reminds us of humanity’s ability to find hope during desperate situations and the
possibility for a new world to be born out of such optimism. Although Natale
expressed his misgivings about the world not being the same anymore and
people no longer holding to ideas of virtue and honor, we now sense, through his
relationship with Roberto, that he feels that he has judged too harshly. As the
shot of the mural fades out, the new day’s dawn skyline (cloudy but with a beam
of sunlight shining through) fades in and the two images are briefly juxtaposed,
alluding, of course, to a new age being born (image 9). Subsequent shots show

²⁴ “Quindi la mia trasgressione non è per negare, ma per meglio affermare il mio rapporto
d’amore con Dio, o con Cristo. Io amo più Cristo che Dio, amo più gli uomini che Dio, perché credo
che, se da qualche parte è in giro nel cosmo, lui vuole questo”. Translated by myself from: Olmi,
Ermanno. Interview with Daniela Padoan. Il sentimento della realtà. Milan, Italy: Editrice San Raffaele,
that the storm has now passed over and the structures surrounding the dam all stand intact.

As Roberto wakes up in the church, he spots the bottle of brandy, instantly suspecting, as he places his hand over his mouth and puffs to smell his breath, that Natale spiked the medicinal concoction. Walking out the door, Natale insists that Roberto rides piggyback to the barracks. As Natale carries him up the hill, Roberto asks if there was brandy in the milk because he smelled it. Natale claims that it was just the medicine tablet. Immediately before noticing that the power has come back on, Roberto asks his companion not to tell their boss that he was sick because he would like to stay at the dam. In a final, playful, acknowledgement of the cultural collision that occurs in the film, the peaceful musical score is interrupted by Roberto’s rock ‘n roll record, and the camera jerks its view of the dam against the mountains back to the barracks as if to remind us that even though a friendly bond has been created between the two men, the transitions needed to accompany the cultural shifts occurring have not been completed yet.
Olmi’s first feature concluded optimistically yet with a hint that Italy’s adjustments to the changes wrought by the economic boom have only begun. With this in mind, there is an interesting link between the three protagonists of Olmi’s first three features. It is possible even to see them as an aging version of the same character whose links to family and ties to tradition are repeatedly cut off. Roberto is a student, but still needs to work in a traditional job outside of the city to find work. Domenico (Sandro Panseri) in Il posto (1961) [The Place, a.k.a. The Sound of Trumpets] is a little bit older, but needs to commute everyday into Milan for his new job. In I fidanzati, Giovanni, in his late twenties - early thirties, has to leave his fiancé and father in the North to work in Sicily. In the centerpiece of this trilogy, (together I think of these films as the Trilogy of the Boom), the city’s role is demonstrated in first bringing people together through the necessity of work and then alienating them from one another socially.

Il posto brought Olmi international attention, winning prizes from the Venice Film Festival and the British Film Institute. Bosley Crowther’s New York Times review exemplifies the glowing responses Olmi was receiving everywhere. “One hesitates, of course, to be too clamorous about Mr. Olmi on the strength of this one film. It is modest in its intentions, limited in its scope. But it clearly reveals a picturemaker who knows how to make a camera see the poetry in life

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and hint at vain longings and ironies too sad and depressing to tell.” (1963: pg.36)²⁶ Although almost all responses to the film are acclamatory, responses to its tone differ. Like Crowther, some have found the film to be depressing, but in retrospect others have found the film to be the most humorous of Olmi’s career, likening Domenico’s relatively expressionless face to the famed ‘Stoneface’ of Buster Keaton (2009: pg. 123)²⁷. The comparison to Keaton is an especially apt allusion, as the silent Keaton characters often bumbled along struggling to deal with the sudden onslaught of modernization, albeit in America in the 1920s.

Domenico is a young man in his late teens or early twenties, on the cusp of entering the new Italian society that promises so much economically that he, like many other potential workers, leaves behind traditional forms of labor to find employment in the city as a clerk. He finds a room full of other young people in the same position as him when he arrives to take an employment test. A young girl named Antonietta (Loredana Detto, who became Olmi’s wife) catches Domenico’s eye and becomes the object of his affection. They undergo a series of tests but are eventually placed in different departments, he as a runner in administration (as they do not need any clerks at the time of hiring) and she as a typist in a separate building. He only sees her once more in the film when she invites him to the New Year’s Eve dance put on by the corporation, though hinting that she might not make it if her parents do not give her permission.

Domenico goes to the dance without seeing Antonietta and in the film’s

conclusion it is revealed that a clerk has died and now Domenico can take the deceased’s position.

After waking up from a bed located in the kitchen of his parents’ apartment, we see Domenico and his brother walking outside of the building to catch the train. In one of the shots displaying their exit, across from their apartment building the courtyard of a cascina is seen (image 10). The sight of the storage space with farm equipment, carts, and stacks of hay and wood immediately outside of the family’s living space transports us to another era and informs us that the world from which Domenico originates has not refurbished itself with the technological and social transformations we will soon see in the city. The type of community these buildings fostered in pre-boom Italy would be recreated in Tree of Wooden Clogs, a close and personal association that seems impossible in the office in which Domenico will finally take his place. Turning back to Casillo and Russo’s quote from the beginning of this chapter, here we
see the paradox of Italian civilization: Italy’s major cities contain the ruins of the people that paved the road to modernity during the renaissance. Its small towns, like the one from which Domenico hails, also bare the marks of an age gone by, a layered historical space, with a foot in the past and another getting ready to leap forward into the era of international capitalism. The age that helped usher in the contemporary economic world has been adopted and adapted into the boom.

A few moments later on the road Domenico’s brother jumps onto a horse-led cart to hitch a ride. When a work purpose vehicle rushes by the cart, the brother hops to the other vehicle for a quicker ride. This brief sequence at the beginning of *Il posto* appropriately conveys a sentiment felt while Italy undergoes the changes that will be shown once Domenico reaches Milan: everyone feels the need to reach their destination a little bit faster (An expanded cinematic observation on the Italian need-for-speed at the dawn of the boom features in Dino Risi’s excellent film *Il Sorpasso* [1962]).

**The Introduction of the Peripheral Figure in Olmi’s Work**

There is another scene from an early Olmi documentary that is worth discussing here to compare to the scene above and also to introduce the peripheral figures of Olmi’s cinema. Because of the boom, during the late 1950s to the early 1960s around 200,000 southern Italians annually moved to the industrial triangle (Milan, Genoa, and Turin) to find work and create new lives (2007: pg. 556-557)\(^{28}\) [The most famous fictional document of this massive national relocation is in Visconti’s film *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960)]. They

were joining the already considerably large group of Italians commuting to the city from the smaller cities and towns at the outskirts of these areas. This translocation occurred simultaneously with the development of Olmi’s style in his early documentaries. The influx of workers and figures from the literal peripheries of the country into the northern cities certainly influenced the Bergamese Olmi’s adaptation of the peripheral figure, examining the foreignness of these modern migrants and their culture.

One of Olmi’s earliest short films, *Dialogo tra un venditore di almanacchi e un passeggier* (1954) [*Discussion Between a Seller of Almanacs and a Passerby*], based on a work by Giacomo Leopardi, establishes Olmi’s distinct utilization of these characters. In the first images of this piece, several shots of countryside and natural environments untouched by the city are displayed. We then follow two men, whom we later discover are musicians, into a city, and as their journey progresses increasing signs of encroaching modernization appear. They come across cars, large advertising billboards, and massive agricultural equipment as they approach the city (images 11 & 12). The two musicians move on until they stop and play their instruments in front of an apartment building. However, they are deterred from the area when they discover another musician has already claimed this location as his own.

All of the above happens within the first four and a half minutes of a ten-minute film. The discussion mentioned in the title is mostly adapted word for word in the last five and a half minutes. The characters presented beforehand are never mentioned. However the discussion suggests that learning to adapt year
after year to the new challenges that arise is requisite for survival. After the salesman states that he would like a life based on present circumstances without knowing what the new year would bring, the passerby responds, “The good life is not the life that you know, but the one that you don’t know; not your past life, but the future. In the new year, circumstances will begin to treat you and me and everybody else well, and the good life will begin.” The almanac salesman probably has traveled from the countryside or the south to find work, selling trinkets to those who have already benefitted from the boom. Coming to the city for work, like the two musicians, he affirms the attitude of the passerby, hoping that the city will bring him new fortune that has eluded him in the past. Olmi resists appraising the developments brought about by modernity or the necessary transitions undertaken to survive in these new circumstances. Laura Vichi writes of the film

The transition, seen in the first two parts of this short film, from a farming civilization to an industrial one, is represented
by the journey of the two musicians and by the encounter between the two environments, which appears unstoppable, but unlike Olmi’s other films, natural. The film, with an ironic but non-polemic look, seems to take note of the transformation of the 1950s that is informing Italian society. Nevertheless, both the countryside from which the musicians depart and the city as a pole of attraction become absorbed in a broader discussion on human existence (2003: pg.133)\textsuperscript{29} \textsuperscript{30}.

The discussion the musicians become sidelined for renders them peripheral both in terms of the focus of the short film and the concerns of the white-collar workers that pass them on the street. We know nothing about them besides their origins and occupation as we would know nothing about the feelings of the almanac seller if the passerby had not stopped to chat and the camera had not granted us access to this private conversation.

Throughout his career, Olmi has visually highlighted personalities that would otherwise reside in the invisible sections of our vision, appealing to us to broaden our perspectives. Industrialization brought along with it the unprecedented ability of allowing the inhabitants of larger northern Italian cities to


\textsuperscript{30} “Il passaggio, indicato nelle prime due parti del cortometraggio, da una civiltà contadina a una civiltà industriale, e rappresentato dal percorso dei due musicanti e dal confronto tra i due ambienti, appare inarrestabile ma, a differenza di altri film di Olmi, naturale. Il film, con sguardo ironico ma non polemico, sembra prendere atto della trasformazione che nei primi anni Cinquanta sta informando la società italiana. Tuttavia, tanto la campagna di cui partono i suonatori che la città come polo di attrazione vengono assorbite in un discorso più ampio sull’esistenza umana”. My translation.
ignore and be unfamiliar with the increasingly appearing new faces they passed on the street, even those individuals that lived near them, or worked with them. In literature these figures had appeared after rapid industrialization, even as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. In the ‘Time Passes’ section of Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*, during a description of the passing of spring into summer and vivid descriptions of the natural world and its effects on a house, the author includes in brackets updates on several characters and references others who do not find a place in her narrative at all. Amid her description of summer she includes “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.],” and then continues into the next paragraph describing examples of the ‘divine bounty’ one could discover outdoors without discussing any further the fleeting mention of the significant loss of life and the implications of the First World War until the next section (2006: pg. 109). The passing mention of these deaths invites reflection from readers of the novel. Not only is the death of Andrew Ramsay (a character of the first section) alluded to, but so are those of the unnamed ‘twenty or thirty’ who the novel brings to a sudden death.

The intrusion of similar unknown characters continued and developed in art throughout the twentieth century, making its way into modernist cinema. In Neo-Realism these figures can be found in varying forms from the movement’s beginnings in the 1940s. The peripheral figure implements a feature developed from Neo-Realism’s tendency to have a thin plot in which relatively uneventful

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occurrences and individuals could abruptly shift and contradict facile approaches
to the ‘realities’ conveyed through the film (for example, the sudden change in
tones between the comic and tragic in *Rome, Open City* surrounding Pina’s
death). For Bazin, such moments led him to regard this movement with a
reverence because of the constructed space designated for the implementation
of viewer experience. Experience is a fundamental factor in Bazin’s approach to
cinema as made plain in ‘The ontology of the photographic image.’ The essay
examines human fascination with preservation in the arts and how photography,
and therefore cinema, has further fulfilled this obsession for the ‘real’. Bazin’s
discussion of realism has been debated by many and interpreted to imply that
cinema functions by itself as a recorder and preserver of ‘reality’; the choice to
use the term ‘real’ or ‘realism’ may connote that cinema has the capability of
capturing a physical or metaphysical ‘reality’ as the world passes before one’s
eyes unmanipulated. But near the essay’s beginning, Bazin refutes this reading
when he discusses the preservation techniques of ancient Egyptians.

So, near the sarcophagus, alongside the corn that was to
feed the dead, the Egyptians placed terra cotta statuettes, as
substitute mummies which might replace the bodies if these
were destroyed. It is this religious use, then, that lays bare
the primordial function of statuettes, namely, the
preservation of life by a representation of life... The evolution
side by side, of art and civilization has relieved the plastic
arts of their magic role. Louis XIV did not have himself
embalmed. He was content to survive in his portrait by Le Brun. Civilization cannot, however entirely cast out the bogey of time. It can only sublimate our concern with it to the level of rational thinking. No one believes any longer in the ontological identity of model and image, but all are agreed that the image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death (1967: pg. 9-10)\textsuperscript{32}.

Bazin’s description of the character of photography as ‘objective’ does not imply that the camera itself completely re-embodies the objects that are placed before it in the process of projection, as there is no ‘ontological identity of model and image’, but that in an act of reflection we come into contact internally with something not represented on the screen itself but related to a clash between experience and representation that may recreate a ‘reality’. Mats Rohdin writes “Bazin’s definition of ‘realism’ always entails an intentional act from the spectator producing an abstraction in order to bring out ‘increased meaning’ in the image.” (2007: pg.48)\textsuperscript{33} The peripheral figure prepares such a space for producing abstraction.

Rossellini, who some claim as the first modernist filmmaker with *Journey to Italy* (1954), was already investigating different forms in *Paisà*.


\textsuperscript{33} Rohdin, Mats. “Cinema as an Art of Potential Metaphors: The Rehabilitation of Metaphor in André Bazin’s Realist Film Theory”. *Film International*, 5.6, 41- 53. Print.
Instead of one narrative, the film consists of six episodes, and its progression moves northward from the south, following the Allies’ entry into the country during WWII. The urgency of Harriet and Massimo to find those for whom they search amidst the war in the Florence episode leads the narrative to glance briefly at individuals who do not occupy much screen time beyond these moments. As Massimo desperately runs across the street to continue the search for his family, fascist snipers shoot at him and a partisan soldier comes out from his concealed area to provide covering fire. The partisan is struck and falls to the street dying. Harriet rushes to him as the other partisans uncover the fascist snipers, bring them out and execute them. The wounded partisan repeats “Marco, Marco” and then, after asking Harriet to tell his family so that they will not worry about him, he reveals in his mangled state that Lupo, the man Harriet was looking for, has been killed. Like the many other obscure figures of this episode this resistance soldier remains unnamed as the section concludes and we are left to constitute this man from our own conceptions.

Eight years later in *Journey to Italy*, Rossellini continued to float such characters around the margins of his loose narratives. Alexander Joyce has been spurned from an extra-marital affair and picks up a prostitute to console himself. She lays her head on his shoulder and unloads the tribulations of herself and her friends including her thoughts of suicide. Afterwards, when asked where he wants to go, Joyce has changed his mind and responds that he now just wants to go for a drive and will take the woman anywhere that she wants to go. The

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woman does not appear again nor does anyone discuss her for the remainder of the film. The figures’ presence and dire situations do not represent political statements but they both affect the protagonists in different ways. Similar characters appear, or rather disappear in Antonioni’s L’Eclisse (1962) and, most famously, in L’Avventura (1960). More aligned with Woolf’s peripheral figures, Olmi’s use of these characters often has no effect on the narrative or its protagonists.

…

In Il posto, peripheral figures consistently shadow Domenico’s narrative at the borders of his story and slightly overlap and suggest the other lives and many narratives that could also be the subjects of other films. On the day his application process begins he is required to take a number of written and oral tests during which he meets Antonietta, who becomes the object of his affection. In a scene following one series of tests, Domenico waits for Antonietta outside of the building. After she spots him, a single long take tracks them as they walk down the rest of the block. As they pass one man looking into a shop window, Antonietta brushes past him and then glances at him. Domenico then looks at the man as they both walk off the screen and the shot’s tracking stops and the image remains with the man momentarily as he mumbles to himself. (image 13). This moment in the film gives us pause as we recognize the conventions of narrative film language’s centralization on a protagonist. Olmi reaches beyond the typical use of the long take in Neo-Realism by allowing the protagonists to exit and leave us with unfamiliar characters that have nothing to do with Domenico’s
narrative. Through a modification in film grammar, he challenges the way in which we interact with the cinema as Italian society, and the post-industrial world, including in our own era, adapts to the climate of alienated citizens. Ted Perry underscores what this alteration provides the viewer.

Our habits of thinking, perceiving, and feeling, as reinforced by normal modes of presenting and representing, limit our ability not only to act but also make it difficult for us to stand aside and see matters from a different vantage point. Any work that challenges these habits offers the possibility of deeper and fresher understanding. Many of the films that we ordinarily see merely reinforce values and ideas unquestionably held. By its nature, the modernist film frightens us by suggesting that what we think we feel and know can be a miasma, a harmful scrim placed over reality.
suggesting that neither how we see nor what we see is true.
The modernist film reveals the scrim, forcing us to question what we perceive, think, and feel (2006: pg.12)\textsuperscript{35}.

This moment ventures beyond the borders of traditional narrative by a simple gesture to an individual external to the concerns of the protagonist’s story and challenges our perceptions of the film. In this shot Olmi suggests that cinema can be used as a tool to explore the lives of others. Antonietta and Domenico’s scans of this character, and the subsequent moments we are left alone with him, invite us to perceive this individual beyond the confines of the film in our imaginations in a phenomenological fashion.

A similar figure appears during the scene when Domenico first arrives at the office building to begin his interviews. After being directed by the doorman to the fourth floor to begin his interviews, Domenico walks to the elevator. The mise-en-scène of this sequence rotates our focus to the elderly man who enters as Domenico moves behind the pillar. The old man approaches the doorman asking, in dialect, the location of the welfare office. The doorman does not hear him. As Domenico waits for and eventually enters the elevator our focus has briefly passed to this man. After the old man repeats himself the doorman waves his arms in a gesture of exasperation and a cut is made to Domenico arriving at the personnel office. This moment provides more information about this figure than the man staring in the shop window, but we are still left with many questions and a supplication to consider this undefined individual. Is the man enquiring for

himself or some else? Is the doorman’s expression a sign of helplessness or a lack of desire to help? Again, the problems of these figures remain in our own active inferences outside of the work. Miliicent Marcus states “Olmi’s concept of artistic responsibility shares with [Neo-Realism] the same ethical impulse, which resides at the core of all engage art.” (1986: pg. 212)\textsuperscript{36} Olmi’s modernist tendencies create an encounter with the cinema where watching indicates an engagement that reaches into the immediate political circle that one confronts in the everyday.

A little over half way into the film, we are introduced to Domenico’s future work place and co-workers in an extra-narrative sequence that exits the confines of Domenico’s story and glances at the personal lives of peripheral figures. This sequence of \textit{Il posto} stresses the experience of others besides Domenico in the transition years of the boom period. Peter Bondanella suggests that in this scene “Olmi’s depiction of the simple, day-to-day actions of the office staff shows that they conceal a great wealth of human interest; yet the juxtaposition of the compulsive mannerisms they exhibit at work and their more spontaneous, if often strange, behaviour at home demonstrates clearly the alienating effects of the workplace.” (2009: 228)\textsuperscript{37} The fracture in time disaffects us temporarily from the protagonist’s journey and we are asked to consider what obstructs these individuals from one another. Whether these brief vignettes occur during Domenico’s orientation in the narrative workplace or if they are taking place in

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{37} Bondanella, Peter. \textit{A History of Italian Cinema}. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. Print.
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the past is unclear. This moment then is not meant to further Domenico’s objectives or resolve any narrative dilemmas but requires an operative apperception to comprehend whatever meaning these images may hold when pieced together with respective thoughts and experiences.

After the examinations and interviews, Domenico is first given a job as a runner because there are no positions open for clerks. Immediately after he is introduced to his trainer, a cut is made to the clerk’s office. This transition startles us as we realize we are no longer observing Domenico. Its place in the film suggests that this sequence foretells multiple predicaments that may face the protagonist in the future. Bert Cardullo suggests that the scene displays “The lay of the adult land, as well as a set of possible futures – limited though they may be –for this young office worker. “(2009: pg. 123) Politically, no alternatives are suggested but the adaptation and reactions to the alterations in Italy’s economic infrastructure depicted demand our attention as we dialectically approach what alienates us from others in our own times and societies.

At the scene’s commencement, it shows us the quirky work habits of the clerks. A man with glasses sits near the front and scribbles notes down from a card catalogue (later we discover he is a budding novelist); an obese man throws paper balls over the novelist’s shoulders as he clears out his desk; an older man cuts his cigarettes in half to fit them into his cigarette holder; another man combs his hair and carefully adjusts his sideburns; and a man in the back changes his light bulb when it fizzes out. A clerk suggests to a colleague that the novelist is a

‘brownnose’ and after the colleague’s response that the man can hardly see, the film cuts abruptly to the apartment of the subject of their conversation. He lies in bed, still writing away, but then rises to look out his window when he hears music from outside (image 14). As he looks out the window a cut is made to the landlady outside of the novelist’s door peering in through the eyehole. She walks away complaining loudly about the lights being left on and wondering out loud what the man is writing. He turns out the light by his bed and covers his desk lamp when he turns it on and continues writing. The sequence then shifts to the home of the man who was combing his hair in the office. His wife cuts his hair while he reads the newspaper. The man rises up and hides when someone knocks at the door. The setting changes again to the home of the older cigarette cutter who turns out to have another business (possibly criminal) outside of the office. We also discover in two other
segments of this crystalline sequence that the obese man is an opera singer and that a woman in the office has a delinquent son which causes her much pain (this woman appears briefly before this scene when she arrives in the office of Domenico’s placement interview and is chastised for using the excuse of problems at home for an absence). As the woman discovers that her son has stolen from her, a cut is made back to the office to a panning shot that circles around the room displaying the baffled expressions of her co-workers as they stare at her crying.

This daring scene reminds us of the irony of the narrative’s focus on Domenico by crystallizing this moment through multiple perspectives. Millicent Marcus comments on the sequence “In this vivid juxtaposition of private story and public life in the office, Olmi’s point seems to be that the impersonal, mechanized bureaucracy is made up of intensely human parts, each one capable of generating his or her own versions of Il Posto, just as the novelist office member quite literally generates stories in his spare time.” (1986: 220) The moments with the novelist are particularly embedded with emblematic significance. It does not require much creative effort to see the window as an allusion to the cinema and the novelist’s inspiration to continue writing after his land lady’s penny-pinching diatribe as the sentiment that is desired we take with us out of the film, writing in the lives of those in our proximity. The detemporalization of the sequence enables us to interact with the film by imagining the lives of its peripheral figures and discovering the barriers that
facilitate their alienation. This technique suggests that the cinema can lead us to overcome the obstacles created by modernity that separate us from one another.

This moment becomes more complex during the film’s conclusion when another panning shot circles around the office as the workers stare reverentially at the unoccupied desk of the novelist as if they are at his funeral. A cut is made to the novelist’s home, compared to a near graphic match of this shot before, the room is now barren of life or any personal items, the mattress rolled up and the closet empty (images 15 & 16). Domenico is then invited into the office and placed at the novelist’s desk. The office has become a timeless space, with little suggestion of change, that when left in these frigid and unwelcoming conditions consumes the lives of its workforce as they are deprived of forming the relationships that make work a gratifying experience. Like the sequence in *Il tempo si è fermato* mechanized when Natale winds the clock so it may continue ticking and he may be assured of time’s passing, the workers of Domeico’s office have the repetitive
sounds of the copier to provide them with the small comfort in knowing that at least time continues to carry on, and that at each cycle of the machine one less insignificant moment will pass.

Before this heartbreaking conclusion, a related tragedy unfolds. While still working as a delivery boy, Domencio passes Antonietta in the hall. She stops him with a “ciao” after he has walked by. This is the first time they have run into each other since they were placed in separate offices, despite Domenico’s efforts to find her during the lunch break. As they speak they stand distinctly apart from one another, allowing Antonietta to pretend she is just about to go into her office when her manager passes by (image 17). Before she re-enters her workspace, she asks Domenico if he plans to attend the New Year’s Eve party thrown by the company. She plans to go if her mother will allow her. She says goodbye, afraid that her manager will see her chatting but then quickly reopens the door to
wish him a Merry Christmas. After she retreating behind the door again, Domenico stares at the door longingly.

Upon receiving tacit approval from his parents to attend the New Year’s dance, Domenico heads into Milan, staring out from the tram window at the city streets decorated with lights and filled with activity. He arrives at the party and is given a hat, a party favor, and because he is not accompanied by a woman, a bottle of wine. Besides an older couple, he is the first to appear at the empty dancing hall. He sits by himself and the couple beckons him over, not too subtly displaying their desire not only for the pleasure of his company but also for his bottle of wine. A band at the front of the hall continues to play and the tables on the sides of the hall slowly fill up with more guests while Domenico keeps an eye out for his love interest. Among the late arrivals is a girl, who from a distance resembles Antonietta and we suspect he has not yet spotted her: she has the
same build and haircut and perhaps she has not yet recognized Domenico. Following a close-up we know that this is definitely not Antonietta (image 18).

This girl lacks Antonietta’s radiance and when she invites Domenico to dance, his face expresses disappointment and he ignores her initial advances. The girl eventually grabs him by the hand and leads him out to the dance floor. He ends up enjoying himself, laughing through a line dance, and indulging in some wine. But the scene ends abruptly cutting back to the concluding scene at the office, informing us that the novelist has died. We are left with the sense that Domenico will never be able to form a relationship with Antonietta, nor that he will encounter this girl that he has met at the party. City life and white collar work provide exciting opportunities to meet people in this new society, but if Domenico’s story is typical, and we are led to believe that it is, often the relationships that are formed in this new environment rarely breach the surface of an individual’s personality. Love and familial bonds seem to have become matters that are only thought of when convenient. This sense of alienation and loss of love will become even more apparent in Olmi’s next feature.

**I fidanzati**

*I fidanzati* is the most formally radical Italian film of the 1960s and fully develops a temporal displacement that combines the past, the present, the
future, and fantasy following a questioning of time and memory. Other great
Italian films from the period have overshadowed the film’s brilliance as one of the
greatest Italian films ever made, but that did not prevent it appealing to Jean-Luc
Godard, to whom Olmi’s film would have obvious allure, who placed the film in
his own list of the top ten films ever made39. In the last film of Olmi’s economic
boom trilogy, elderly figures as ‘others’ are given a more complex relationship
with the narrative of the protagonist, Giovanni (Carlo Cabrini), and his lover,
Liliana (Anna Canzi). Giovanni has been asked to transfer to a factory in Sicily
where he will also be promoted. However, he will be leaving a troubled
relationship behind that we find out may have been complicated by an affair. The
relationship appears to reignite while Giovanni is still in Sicily. The film’s shifting
of time, does not allow for a simple reading of the place of events in the narrative
and so when this affair and the consequent reconciliation occurs, or if it happens
at all, remains unclear.

A consistent contrast is created through a language that sets the
relationships of Giovanni and Liliana against his relationship with his father and
fleeting images of other elderly men. Although Il Posto featured the extra-
narrative sequence displaying the personal lives of some of Domenico’s co-
workers, I fidanzati is really Olmi’s first work to consistently shift time for most of
the duration of the film. András Kovács places the film in the nouveau roman
trend of modern filmmaking alongside Pickpocket (1959), Last year at Marienbad
(1961), Successive Sliding of Pleasure (1974), and Trans – Europ – Express

(1967). He writes that the *nouveau roman*’s “Most characteristic features include radical continuity as well as radical fragmented forms; use of non-linear time; reflexivity in the form; theatricality and ornamentalism; and its main genre is investigation.” (2007: pg. 209-212)\(^{40}\) Several of these characteristics appear in Olmi’s work in *I fidanzati*, but Kovács mistakenly assumes that none of Olmi’s other work utilize such radical formal techniques. Rather, the majority of Olmi’s narrative fictional features would adopt the *nouveau roman* style, at least briefly if not for the entirety of each film as in the case of *I fidanzati*.

Those familiar with Italian literature will recognize that this story shares many affinities with Alessandro Manzoni’s 19th century novel, *I promessi sposi* (The Bethrothed). This connection bears mentioning here because of the cause of the lovers’ separation in the book. Don Rodrigo, a local noble, has feelings for Lucia, Renzo’s fiancé. He uses his power and authority to prevent their wedding, setting off a series of events that keeps the couple separated from one another. At the work’s conclusion, what enables redemption and reconciliation for many of the characters are acts of love. In Olmi’s film, the economic boom and the needs of a corporation, not a single powerful entity like the noble, divide Giovanni and Liliana. For a portion of the film, it seems as if the lovers will be reunited and we have hope that love can still overcome the strictures and pressures of civilization. But by the film’s conclusion, those hopes are contradicted.

Near the film’s beginning, Giovanni is asked by his superiors whether he is married. After answering no he is told “Good. Fewer complications. You know

how it is with transfers.” A cut is then made to Giovanni as he exits a room where his father sits. He leaves and says something to his father, though no dialogue is audible during this moment (image 19). A sound bridge guides us into the next scene where Giovanni discusses his father with the same unidentified superior. A montage of shots of lonely and despondent old men follows as the conversation continues. Giovanni feels he has no other choice than accepting that he has to leave his father behind. The father is only seen or spoken of passingly in only a few, but striking, moments in the rest of the film.

A more celebrated Neo-Realist inspired example of a similar figure, though different in its effects, can be found in Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960). Peter Brunette writes “*L’avventura’s* story or narrative line itself is filled with ellipses where they had not been used before. Much exposition is forgone, in the best modernist fashion, and this contributes importantly to its unconventional narrative feeling.” (1998: 29) The shattering of conventional narrative devices is chiefly achieved by a lead figure that disappears within the first quarter of the film. A
group of friends go on a sailing trip together and one of them, Anna, disappears. At first her friends search for her, but about halfway through the film she is no longer a concern for the characters. “This double disappearance creates a gaping hole in the film, an invisibility at its centre, which suggests an elsewhere, a nonplace, that remains forever unavailable to interpretation and that destroys the dream of full visibility”, Brunette continues. (ibid: 31)41 This elsewhere created by the loss of these figures, in both I fidanzati and L’avventura, is a space for us to occupy as we piece together what the presented world means, especially without these figures who have seemingly vanished, and asks for an appropriation of our own experience and political inclinations in redeeming them.

In Olmi’s film the suggestion to consider this figure becomes a task of greater political significance when considered alongside the other elderly figures and Giovanni’s relationship with Liliana. In image 19, we are distanced from the conversation between Giovanni and his father by the camera’s placement outside of the window and our inability to hear their conversation. Our lack of access renders this moment intimate for them, but the montage of unidentified old men that follows implies all of the existing nameless aged outside of this narrative who we can interact with civically (image 20). Liliana is also a figure that disappears for a while after the film’s beginning but becomes retrieved towards the ending as the lovers’ relationship reignites; this relationship suggests within Giovanni’s life the rapport with his father can be recovered and that externally to the film other forgotten material figures can also be recaptured.

After arriving in Sicily, some of Giovanni’s new colleagues pick him up from the airport and take him to the hotel where he will stay until he finds more suitable accommodation. On the drive there, the co-workers barely succeed at making small talk as Giovanni gazes at the ruins and peasant houses of the Sicilian countryside. An accident nearly occurs when a horse-drawn carriage pulls into the road. These first impressions the film gives us of Sicily indicate that it lacks the urban sophistication of modernized areas, such as the industrial triangle of the North; that there is something present in the culture resisting change. Unlike his colleagues, Giovanni remains curious about the Sicilians, their culture, and the environment that has created them. In fact, cuts are made to Liliana and Giovanni’s father while the driver continues to complain about road conditions and cyclists. This is not a quote of a prior sequence, but seems to be a representation of Giovanni’s thoughts, ignoring his co-workers and either reinterpreting or reimagining his departure from those for whom he cares. In the next scene we see that everyone at the hotel appears to be suffering from a work-induced isolation similar to Giovanni’s. Only in scenes of togetherness
and community, during the traditional festival sequence and in the possibly imagined lover’s reconciliation near the film’s conclusion, is any sort of happiness suggested. The formal requirements of new business etiquette and the separation from loved ones yield miserable experiences for Giovanni and his colleagues. Following their arrival at the hotel, Giovanni unpacks his items in his room and then heads down to the hotel’s restaurant for dinner. The waiter fusses at him at first for coming in so late before asking whether he prefers soup or pasta. When he brings out the food, the waiter explains his previous abruptness by detailing the stresses he and his co-worker undergo in preparing 100 to 150 meals a day and that when he returns home he has to cook for himself because his wife is staying at her mother’s. When he returns with water he tells Giovanni about his son being in the hospital and his worries about not knowing what illness affects the boy. Giovanni expresses his condolences before the cook calls the waiter back to the kitchen. The waiter’s openness about his personal problems denotes the isolation life at this hotel inspires not only for its occupants, but also for its workers. After dinner Giovanni walks into a lounge and sits in the back of a dark room, lit only with a television set, filled with men staring blankly ahead, their faces void of any pleasure (image 21). Languor and melancholy seem to emanate from whatever program they are watching that assists these men in witnessing their time fade away as they dream of returning home.

Much of I Fidanzati features Giovanni encountering the resistant traditions of Sicily, including a scene in which he stumbles onto labourers working in seawater basins. As in Il posto, Olmi refrains from pronouncing explicit
judgements on either the industrial development or the methods used by the traditional labourers. Though he also develops a radically innovative way of communicating temporal displacement in this film, he continues to maintain a consistent distance between representation and ideological interpretation within the image in his further examinations of the boom of the early 1960s so that these scenes may be approached through experience.

As done in his two previous features, Olmi adapts the blurred images of Neo-Realism’s urban spaces, extending this technique to the idea of the nation, especially as the country had reunited after its actual division during the Second World War, and again economically during the 1960s. He refигures the dynamics of the relationship between northern and southern Italy seen through the eyes of Giovanni. In fact much of what occurs between the separation and reconciliation of the lovers is Giovanni exploring and experiencing the activities of Sicilians. In a conversation in which Giovanni discusses a work accident at his plant with a co-worker, the co-worker describes the Sicilians as backwards, not capable of adjusting to modern work techniques. He says, “We need to start all over. With
the new generation, who knows?” After this discussion, we follow Giovanni as he
wanders around different areas of his new environment, observing the people at
work and at leisure. These moments neither affirm nor contradict Giovanni’s co-
workers’ statements about Sicilians. For example, Giovanni approaches a field,
where laborers are digging up salt from seawater basins and piling them into
mounds (image 22). He then watches a pair of the workers attach sheets to a
windmill and wind it (image 23). The only sounds are of the workers digging, the
windmill being prepared and Giovanni greeting the workers. The historical
tension between northern and southern Italy and between tradition and modernity
is faintly present, but remains unstated. As we watch the workers, their lives and
bodies become inseparable from their work: their leathered skin and broken
smiles complement the cheerful attitudes they have while they accomplish their

![Image 22](image22.jpg)

tasks. The workers do not necessarily appear backwards, but they are not
wearing safety equipment and do not make use of any of the advanced
technology that we see used at Giovanni’s plant. The texture of their tools (the
wood of the shovels and the windmills; the straw hats used to shade themselves) implies the simplicity of their methods, but makes no value judgements. This ambiguous scene echoes the effects of the Neo-Realist films that the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics praised.

In an article in *Cahiers du cinéma* by a priest and close friend of Bazin, Amédée Ayfre makes an insightful link between a style similar to Olmi’s approach in this sequence from *I fidanzati* and Bazin’s theories on ‘reality’ in film. He suggests that Neo-Realist filmmakers need not be great philosophers to produce works that can phenomenologically represent the ‘real’. He argues that the condition for this representation to occur is “That the event has been allowed to conserve its completeness. The slightest intrusion of any treatment whereby the author tends to make his personal interpretation of the intrinsic meaning explicit compromises the whole operation.” (1985: pg. 188) Ayfre feels that this permits the viewer freedom. He states “It is striking to note how the filmmaker places us face to face with a human event taken in its totality, but refrains from
fragmentation or analysis, simply surveying it, describing it concretely and working in such a way that in the midst of watching we lose the sense of spectacle and the awareness of acting in the actors disappears.” (ibid: pg. 184)\(^{42}\)

The ambiguity that Ayfre implies as part of phenomenological Neo-Realism is essential to any film that desires to create a space for interpretation. In the observational moments from *I fidanzati* our viewpoint has been aligned with Giovanni’s. We are continually reminded of his presence during this scene as he crosses the field watching the workers partake in their quotidian past. Though he does not intrude on the scene, he seems out of place here, just as Domenico and his brother look in the courtyard of the *cascina* in *Il Posto*.

Through the continual realignment of Giovanni’s gaze with our own we are reminded of our own sense of displacement in this landscape and the binding relationship between the Sicilian labourer and his traditional methods of carrying out his work. Giovanni’s presence here threatens this lifestyle. These labourers have been moulded in an environment where a massive rearrangement of their economic system hovers over their future.

The struggle between tradition and culture becomes fully fleshed out in a kind of touristy invasion of Sicilian tradition a few scenes later, in the middle of the film. The festival sequence of *I fidanzati* also demonstrates that as Olmi’s style became increasingly complex his commitment to the ideals of Neo-Realism remained unimpaired. While some have been strict in qualifying only a select group of films as Neo-Realist, according to the similarities shared between the

most noted works of this movement, Bazin was not so stringent. “Neo-Realism does not necessarily exist in a pure state and one can conceive of it being combined with other aesthetic tendencies. Biologists distinguish in genetics, characteristics derived from different parents, so called dominant factors. It is the same with Neo-Realism” (1971: pg. 67)\textsuperscript{43}. Therefore, Olmi changing the language of long takes and linear narratives that defined Neo-Realism for many, and expressing ‘reality’ differently, does not disqualify the engaging effects, similar to those of Neo-Realism, of his own films.

In the festival scene, Olmi wraps together many of the elements of Giovanni’s life at a night of the festival in Acireale. A couple of Giovanni’s colleagues accompany him to the party, informing him of the spectacles at the festival to witness. Their excitement about the event does not prevent the co-workers from speaking pejoratively about Sicilians on the way to the event when a car passes them. One of them states that the people here would be better off driving bumper cars than being permitted to drive automobiles.

Much of the actual festival is unstaged and Olmi records its events as they occur. The documentary like observation of this event unites with Giovanni’s viewpoint as a-temporal and spatial excursions break up the scene of the party. Among a huge crowd in a piazza, partygoers wear masks and costumes, and people hurl confetti at one another while others dance. When we are shown an old man dancing around, a cut is made to Giovanni’s father who rises out of bed.

as a woman chastises him for having too much to drink (images 24 & 25). At the end of the festival, fireworks shoot out from a wooden float (image 26).

When Giovanni goes back to his hotel room, another cut is made to a separate festival at the ballroom in the north from the film’s beginning. Giovanni is dancing with another woman and Liliana is seated alone at a table. A few moments later several shots of the plant at night remind us of the Acireale festival as fiery rivets shoot out from labors performed (image 27).

The festival is a distinct meeting point of a traditional culture, where despite anything else that might occur, people gather and re-enact the traditions
of ages that have their significance determined according to the present climate.

The visual pairing of the festival to the fiery rivets shooting out at the factory bridges a gap of adjustment to the modern world to which the Italian economy exposes its citizens. The cuts to Giovanni’s father and lover show the elements of Giovanni’s life that remain in his thoughts and feelings, despite his separation from them because of work.

By this point, Liliana has transformed into a peripheral figure for Giovanni, someone who has not entered into the life we see him experiencing during the majority of the film. However, Liliana seems to be redeemed in the sequence near the end of the film that begins with her reception of a letter from Giovanni. As we watch her ascending stairs to her room, the letter she wrote in response is given to us as if it was a conversation between two people sitting aside one another as cuts continue to be made back and forth between them (image 28 & 29). She says

*When I received your letter, I got scared. I wanted to open it right away but I couldn’t work up the courage. I felt excited*
and happy running up the stairs. But then suddenly that happiness frightened me. I was afraid. I don’t know why. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind, most of them disturbing. I even thought this might be your last letter. I admit I was afraid. I had lost faith and hope as well. Now I’m sorry I thought ill of you.

After Liliana apologizes, she tells Giovanni that she recently visited his father and that he spends most evenings sitting outside of his neighbors flat watching TV through their door (image 30). In the middle of shots between Giovanni and Liliana, the shot in image 30 is cut to momentarily, and then the shots resume interchanging between the couple. The figure of the father has no exact purpose in being mentioned or shown, but his presence lingers as the film moves on. Though the lovers are temporally and spatially separated from one another, Olmi’s framing of Liliana, on the right side of the screen (image 28) as she reads the letter looking off screen to the left, and the following shot which frames Giovanni on the left side of the screen (during a sound bridge of the line
“Now I’m sorry I thought ill of you”) looking towards the right, (image 29) suggests a type of connection authentically shared by the couple, and between Giovanni and his father, despite their distance that is not expressed in the emotionally fraught dialogue. What is felt can only be distinguished by an encounter between these filmic representations and actual experience.

After Liliana apologizes to Giovanni for thinking ill of him, they discuss their desire to continue writing each other, framed as if an entire peninsula was not between them (image 31 & 32). The scene continues in a classroom Giovanni attends for his job, and his voiceover recommences as he sits inattentively, suggesting that he always thinks of Liliana. During these written conversations they are framed individually, walking towards each other. They discuss their first encounter, and multiple scenes of them are shown together in a-temporal settings as their correspondence continues, leaving us to guess if
what we see is in the past or in a projected future they envision together. By displaying these figures separated, Olmi suggests the feelings they treasure from the experiences of their relationship. Then showing them together he imagines their future or assists them in reviving their past bringing them together in an undefined space as the music that runs throughout the film reaches a crescendo and they finally kiss (images 33 & 34). Tullio Kezich writes of Olmi’s style in this film “Reality and memories, experiences and dreams mix themselves in this chronicle of the existence of Giovanni” and later adds, “The work appears with a superior ambiguity of total, exhaustive representation” (2004: pg. 25). 

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is capable of ‘total, exhaustive representation’ because of the manner in which it invites us to revisit experiences and reconstructs lives and realities of the past, dreams, and the future.

When this delightful scene concludes, an abrupt shift of tone occurs. We are shown scenes of a storm tearing through the countryside immediately before we see Giovanni attempting to call someone, whom we assume is Liliana (even though we do not hear the other party’s voice on the phone, when time is running out we hear the operator tell Giovanni he has three minutes). From his responses, the other person seems puzzled that Giovanni has called and he tells him/her that because it is Sunday the call will only be charged at half the normal rate. When the operator reminds him how much time he has left, he asks the interlocutor to remember to write him and suggests he may call next Sunday.

All of the optimism that emerged from the scenes that displayed the lovers’ reconciliation has suddenly disappeared. We now question whether any of these scenes of reunion ever occurred or can occur at all; unable to rationally locate a time when he can hope to feel Liliana’s presence again, we may have seen Giovanni’s wishes fulfilled through the fantasy that film can provide but that has no place in the natural world, especially in the new world founded by the boom. In Manzoni’s novel, the protagonists are finally able to wed because of sacrifices inspired by love made by themselves and several other characters. In Olmi’s film, although the lovers’ reunion is not completely hopeless, we are given no promise that everything will work out in the end. When Giovanni makes the call at the film’s conclusion, he reports that he has to catch the bus to go to work
shortly. He appears to be married to his job, through no fault of his own but because he needs to meet the demands of his employers and support himself and possibly a future family. Work clouds whatever vision he may have of one day being able to fulfill the scenes of the rekindling of his romance with Liliana that we have witnessed.

At the end of the trilogy, Olmi’s presentation of the boom does not demonize capitalism or the success and new opportunities it has provided, but is critical of the way it has obfuscated reality, the world, and our relationships with others. Six years after I fidanzati, the quotidian world of so many in Italy had become unrecognizably transformed. In this world, many continued to remain completely oblivious to the existence of those in their own vicinities who had no bearing on their economic lives.
Chapter 2: Challenging the Disaffection and Malaise of Post-Boom Italy

Un certo giorno

For the contemporary viewer, rather than any other film in its own era, Lucrecia Martel’s *The Headless Woman* (2008) comes most readily to mind when thinking of *Un certo giorno* (1968) [One Day, A.K.A. One Fine Day]. Martel’s film also prominently highlights those (in her film, the native and impoverished Argentinian population) who typically remain invisible to the attentions of wealthier classes through a vehicular manslaughter situation. While some have compared *The Headless Woman* to Antonioni and Hitchcock in terms of style and tone, the plot element of the accidental death of a bystander being hit by a car and the film’s social interests align more with those of Olmi. A further bond shared by the two films can be found in their political motivations. As Oscar Jubis has noted writing on *The Headless Woman*,

This story about a boy who disappears mysteriously evokes the fate of the *desaparecidos* [the disappeared], the thousands of young people arrested by the right-wing dictatorship that governed Argentina in the 1970s. Years later, it was revealed that they were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean from airplanes or buried clandestinely. Those in the upper class who were not directly implicated in the conduct of the government chose to enjoy their pleasures and

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privileges while turning a blind eye on the atrocities (2010: pg. 101)\textsuperscript{46}.

Although Olmi’s film does not invoke a specific group like “the disappeared” from a series of horrific events in Italy’s own history, his condemnation of the inaction of the privileged classes in politics is equally severe in tone.

Perhaps when thought of in connection to the Argentinean film, and with a knowledge of Olmi’s other films, perceiving Olmi’s method of insisting on viewer responsibility in understanding reality would be more noticeable. At the time of its release, many critics did not recognize Olmi’s particular method of calling attention to other characters beyond the story of his protagonists through his utilization of peripheral figures. In Vincent Canby’s review of the film for The New York Times, the critic acknowledges the social significance of the accident that leads to manslaughter, but specifically complains about Olmi’s peripheral figures. “Olmi, however, is a director who likes to compose individual images for beauty’s sake. There seems to be much photographing of characters through glass, as well as a pan horizontally across exteriors and interiors to pick up people who are arbitrarily off-screen when the scenes begin. This is fancy filmmaking and it is finally as tiresome as the title is heavily ironic.” (1969: pg. 40)\textsuperscript{47} It is unfortunate that Canby cannot see beyond what he sees as “fancy filmmaking” because Olmi makes particular efforts in Un certo giorno both to expand the lives of at least one


of his peripheral figures, and to ironically indicate the purposes of a particular element of society to envision others lives more clearly.

Bruno (Brunetto Del Vita) works at a Milan advertising agency and becomes temporarily promoted when a colleague, Davoli, has a heart attack. Although married, he has multiple affairs, including one with another employee of his firm, a beautiful young woman whose name is not given (Lidia Fuortes). Driving in heavy winter conditions with another female colleague on the way to a presentation he suddenly notices some liquid on his back window. When he pulls over to see what has happened to his car, he discovers that he has hit a worker, Stuchi, who was walking on the roadside. Bruno’s colleague drives him, the injured man, and the injured man’s co-worker to a nearby hospital. After leaving his information at the hospital with his colleague, Bruno stops by a local agency where he has previously done business so he can use the phone to call his lawyer and his company’s headquarters in Frankfurt.

Bruno’s daughter arrives at the building to spend the night with her father at the office after the company called his home and informed her that he was staying at this business in order to receive telephone calls. This accident has only amplified a mental and emotional crisis for Bruno that he has been experiencing at least since his colleague’s heart attack, facing him with a number of moral concerns regarding his relationships with his family, friends, and business associates. Already trying to deny the seriousness of the situation to his daughter, when he calls the hospital, he discovers that Stuchi has died (There is no one credited as playing “Stuchi “ in the final credits nor listed in any
description of the film I could find. When Bruno calls the hospital he refers to him as the man hit by a car. But the film does not facilitate a familiarity with the characters’ names. The names Bruno and Stuchi, and any other names that we know, are only learned through their use a handful of times. The film is designed for us to be familiar with characters only as we encounter them). The lawyer arrives in the morning and drives Bruno and his daughter to the Carabinieri station. Bruno, his colleague, and Stuchi’s co-worker all provide testimony regarding the accident. In their questioning, the Carabinieri’s approach to this particular incident is to frame Stuchi as a man who died because of drunkenness. A trial of the accident commences and concludes without finding fault with Bruno and the film ends while Bruno and his wife sit watching TV in their living room, expressing the hope that now everything will return back to normal. In another narrative running parallel to Bruno’s, in a scene at the beginning and towards the conclusion of the film, we see Bruno’s paramour walking around and visiting the apartment of a male friend discussing their lives and work.

As the film begins, it immediately throws us into the business world and the financial gains of knowing people and what they basely desire. After an initial scene showing Bruno presenting his advertising agency in a conference, a cut takes us into an advertising design room where a manager instructs an illustrator on what his ads need to concentrate on to sell their product (image 35). This office world would not be completely unfamiliar to Olmi, because of his time working at Edison-Volta. However given his background, which he describes as
“Belonging half to the rural world of my mother and the other half to the privileged category of my father”, as the son of a family of farmers, the half of Olmi that was raised to think he had red hair because he was born under a tomato plant rather than a cabbage patch like everyone else, finds this location and purposes foreign and its goals immoral (2013: La pianta di pomodori). The lack of a sense of community here (not just in this office but also between Bruno and others, the young woman and her friend, etc.) dwells worlds away from the bonds shared by the farming families that spend life together in L’albero degli zoccoli nine years later.

The irony that subtly runs through the film is that the firm seeks to know people and how they think in order to sell them things, specifically for most of the film, a new food product. In the scene pictured above in image 35, the illustrators are designing an ad for a deodorant featuring a man and a woman on a scooter.

48 “...appartenevo per metà al mondo rurale di mia madre e per l’altra alla categoria dei privilegati di mio padre”. Translated from Italian by myself.

to sell the idea that the deodorant defines masculinity. The manager debates with them on how they should highlight the male’s armpit. In a meeting shortly afterwards this same manager gives a presentation during which Davoli, one of the firm’s administrators, appears noticeably uncomfortable. No one says anything, or follows him outside to check on his condition, and the meeting continues. When he steps out, the film disorientingly cross-cuts between a shot of the blinding light of the projector in the conference room and the administrator attempting to recover. These shots provide the first indication in this film that it has adopted a similar structure to I fidanzati, fusing the present with the past, present, future and imagination. This style, combined with the film’s practice of following several other characters at times, that have noting to do with story of Bruno and the accident, decreases our ability to locate many of the events temporally. It also reflects that the characters seem to live in separate planes of existence, and only briefly do they overlap and share events. Everyone has his or her own concerns and activities that do not connect with the lives of those surrounding them. Later on, after this situation is discovered to have been an heart attack, Davoli’s doctor advises him to avoid all work, to walk for two hours a day, and relax for an extended period of time. The cold, stressful environment that exists at the agency have carried this man away from his natural needs and desires.

Bruno is also on the verge of undergoing a mental and physical breakdown when we see him enter a hotel lobby to meet a woman with whom he is having an affair (image 36). The lobby recalls the television room of the hotel in
I fidanzati where Giovanni joined other workers in between homes and normal lives to kill time. In both of these films, hotels function as a home that never really feels like home. Giovanni dreams of returning north to Liliana while he sleeps alone and Bruno utilizes the bed the hotel provides to avoid returning to his wife and daughter and to have an affair, from which his body and facial expressions imply he receives no pleasure. No warmth or comfort is apparent in either of these situations.

Only one other person besides his lover sits in the lobby’s chairs, sleeping while the television blares and prevents conversation. Bruno and the woman only ask each other if they have eaten before they discreetly walk separately up to their hotel room. Undressing, no amorous words are shared, or any enquiries made about one another’s lives. Bruno lies on the bed and stares at the roof while his lover stares at him and takes the last few puffs on their cigarette before they have sex. But even as they begin to kiss, Bruno turns his head away, his
mind in other places. We are not sure when this even takes place. Although it falls between the heart attack of Bruno’s colleague and his visit to Davoli’s house, this woman only reappears in flashes further on, when Bruno falls into an emotional and moral collapse, and no one mentions her. We know that Bruno has at least one other affair with the woman from his office but we cannot precisely identify when that relationship begins or ends either. This is partly because when the film ends we are not sure whether any real change has occurred in the way Bruno understands his relationships with others.

After some meetings that suggest Bruno may become promoted to the role of his afflicted co-worker, we are suddenly introduced to a young woman from his agency. Bruno’s affair with her, or any backstory, has not yet been provided. Like the extra-narrative sequence of Il Posto, this segment expands the universe of the film, and in the process expands our own understanding of reality and the world around us if we see other people as also capable of having stories worth following.

Here, it will be useful to refer to Stanley Cavell’s understanding of how film represents the world, which can illuminate why this segment, and other similar segments in Olmi’s films, has this expansive function. Cavell’s approach to the relationship between reality and the cinema is not exactly inspired by Bazin’s views, but Cavell has seriously considered the French critic’s insights into this relationship and offers another outlook on the subject that is based on the American philosophical tradition. For Cavell, the perspective of reality that film

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49 This woman, Lidia Fuortes, is credited as the interviewer in the credits.
suggests can be a catalyst, sparking into life ideas of the world and how we comprehend it.

When a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world is cut out. The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection, are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents. A camera is an opening in a box: that is the best emblem of the fact that a camera holding on an object is holding the rest of the world away. The camera has been praised for extending the senses; it may, as the world goes, deserve more praise for confining them, leaving room for thought (1979: pg. 24). What is suggested in this passage is that the cinema (through the series of photographs it shows to give an impression of a moving world) can incite thinking by offering us views of reality that are expanded upon, and expand our vision of reality simultaneously, as we relate these images to the world as it exists. Olmi's films utilize this feature of the cinema to highlight the relative absence of meaningful personal connections in the contemporary world.

... As the sequence begins, we see the woman leaving a building with a male co-worker and we accompany them out on the street. They have a friendship although they do not yet appear to have complete familiarity with one another. Walking out of the building, when asked what she is working on, she replies “Martian food”, and then asks him if he is a Martian. He responds “I don’t think

so, … but if you want to investigate…” Once outside, she asks him what is the first thing he does after work. As they walk into a park he tells her that he has a difficult time being in an office all day and that he likes to take a walk after work, see people (image 37). [This stands in contrast to Bruno who, also enjoying nature as evidenced by his trip earlier in the film down to his Tuscan cabin with a representative from the German office, seems to prefer the outdoors in solitude or away from large amounts of people]. Despite taking pleasure in his walks and the presence of others, his conversation with this woman reveals that he leads a mostly lonely existence, spending most nights by himself, eating alone before he retires to bed.

The two friends buy some food before heading up to the man’s apartment, which also serves as an art studio (image 38). When he turns the light on to reveal the art work cluttering his apartment, the budding novelist of Il Posto springs to mind. Like the unfortunate writer from the earlier film, this artist also
seeks to imagine the lives of others through creative outlets and discover an escape from his loneliness. Like the other figure this man also remains nameless, and by the conclusion of the film, when we see him once more, the belongings of his room have likewise disappeared.

The young woman becomes awestruck when the room lights up, unprepared for this aspect of her co-worker’s personality to be unveiled. The way the shot is framed, through multiple doorways, gives the impression that there are unseen layers to this man that have not appeared on the surface to her or to us. She asks which painting was most recently completed and he points her to one hanging on the wall near his bed. It depicts two houses: one, a larger one placed in the foreground and one smaller off to the other’s side, set further in the back. He tells her its name is “la solitudine di tre persone” (“The Loneliness of Three People”), and states that two people live in the larger house and one person lives in the back. She enquires which house he lives in and he replies in
the smaller, white one in the back but that he thinks the other two people who are living together are probably more lonely than he is. As the night continues, this artist reflects on some of the same reservations about adjusting to others as Natale in *Il tempo si è fermato*, not just in his comfort in solitude, but also in his desire for time to remain still, for nothing to change.

After they appear to have eaten, the two sit opposite one another, he laying on his bed and she in a chair facing him with her feet placed beside his. When she asks him why he does not speak he tells her that he prefers not to think, that in not thinking he allows himself to get lost in the space around him and for time to stop moving forward. When earlier she asked the man ‘Are you a Martian?’ his foreignness and aloofness had not surfaced yet and we may not have identified the pun that jumps to mind after we enter his intimate living space. But by now, he has been unveiled as verily alienated, a stranger living among the ‘normal’ population that could just as easily have appeared in Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

It is in this moment, and also at the end of the film, when comprehending this man’s inaction that we get a sense of political fervor in the director’s work that lies completely underneath any visible surface, morally refusing to direct us towards any action. Olmi had publically been accused of being a-political, even by several friends, after he made the simple and sweet natured, yet still formally complex, short film *La cotta* [*The Crush*] in 1967 for television, shortly before the protests that broke out in the following months. These claims are ridiculous,
specifically because the film was made well before the riots in Europe of May 1968. The film’s plot, also complicated by a blend of time and imagination, revolves around teenage love, a reality that Olmi felt was present despite whatever political occurrences were taking place at the time (2008: pg. 50)\textsuperscript{51}.

But when watching \textit{Un certo giorno}, and many of Olmi’s other works, when the viewer thinks about this character, Bruno, and the novelist from \textit{Il Posto}, it would be difficult not see the call to action. They linger in their own circles, finding comfort in resisting change and the opportunities to encounter new people that exist in the large cities they live in. These are men who have no desire to change their own unpleasant conditions or to create a better reality for someone else. In what is, for me, the director’s most revealing quote about his philosophy and why he makes films, Olmi responded to an interviewer who told him his films “Will always seem difficult because people are not trained to ‘read’ images”. Olmi replied

\begin{quote}
No. The problem is not one of comprehension. The public wants to evade reality because any reality portrayed on the screen demands that the spectator take responsibility for it. The average spectator is so reluctant to do so that if he actually saw himself there, he would deny that the character corresponded to him… Most films subvert culture because they encourage evasion of responsibility. In my view, society must be made up of responsible men, for those who do not
\end{quote}

take responsibility for their own lives are ripe to be led by a dictator (1987: pg. 104)\textsuperscript{52}.

In many of Olmi’s films, several irresponsible individuals emerge, whether protagonists, secondary characters, or peripheral figures, who actively avoid taking any action. However, Olmi largely resists delivering pedagogical messages in his films, fully aware of the ethical contradiction that would occur if he did so. His depiction of these individuals reiterates his philosophy that the viewer takes responsibility for reality, political or in other senses, both in the film and in their respective worlds.

After seeing Bruno initiate an extra-marital affair with the woman in the hotel and later visiting his stricken colleague, Davoli, we witness a meeting about a new product, ‘Job Dinner, \textit{pasto di lavoro}’ (work meal) designed to challenge traditional, time consuming Italian modes of cooking to adapt to a busier age. Following the meeting, Bruno drives towards the airport with a female colleague for another meeting. They discuss the success of the meeting and also the possibility that Davoli will not return to work. Right after announcing that he also plans on retiring in a few years to hunt with his dogs because he has had enough of men, we hear an unidentifiable clank, as if something has either hit the car or a part has broken. Bruno asks what the noise was and his colleague responds that she heard a collision, like a rock hitting the car. He looks over at the back right

side window and sees that an oily substance has covered it, perhaps tar Bruno’s companion suggests (image 39). After guessing at what may have happened, Bruno decides to pull off to the side of the road and take a look at the back of the car. Walking around the car, satisfied that nothing appears seriously damaged he pauses when he looks down the road in the direction of where the startling sound occurred. He runs towards two men, one of whom lies on the ground, and instantly we recognize, along with Bruno, that the sound occurred when the car hit this man and the substance on the window is possibly blood. Bruno, along with the injured man’s friend, pull the man out of the snow and onto the road prior to Bruno running back to tell his companion to drive the car back so they can take the man to the hospital. Bruno, either in remorse or anger, (or more likely a mixture of the two), swears and then asks, “Where did you guys pop out from. I didn’t see anyone”. The uninjured worker replies in Milanese dialect (revealing his class status) that they were returning home from work.
Once at the hospital, a group of nurses and nuns bring the injured man inside for further examination. When we see his body laid on the bed, as he babbles incomprehensibly about his children, we see no wounds to suggest that the injury is severe. Inside, Bruno, standing aside his co-worker and the friend of the injured party, wonders aloud if he can catch the next plane for Frankfurt. Bruno is told that he may depart after leaving his contact information. Bruno does so, confirming with his co-worker that she does not mind remaining at the hospital while he goes to a nearby office that his advertising firm has worked with to call his company and its lawyer. As he calls the company, he asks them to call the head office in Frankfurt and inform them of the situation and why he will not attend the meeting. He hangs up the phone and an unclear cut is made to a panning shot (seemingly from the point of view of a car) of a man shifting through roadside debris (image 40). This may be a flashback, but if so it was not seen
before; it is not even clear if we see one of the two men involved in the accident or if this is the location of the accident. This may be either a reimagining or reconstruction of the events that led up to the collision with the peasant worker, or a memory of another worker at a roadside. The next shot cuts back to Bruno, obviously stressed and uncomfortable, rubbing his hands on his face as he sits alone in a dark room. The strange cut calls our attention to Bruno’s feelings and thoughts following the incident.

…

One would not be faulted for likening the structure of such editing for the style of Alain Resnais, who constructs his films in a similar a-historical manner. Both of these styles share certain similarities that locate them within a certain group of European filmmakers that began working in the decade after the conclusion of WWII. Beyond the general label of modernist filmmakers, and the *nouveau roman* label applied by Kovács, this group is perhaps best summarized in the writings of the Italian director’s one-time co-worker and friend, Pier Paolo Pasolini. In his book *Heretical Empiricism*, Pasolini asserts that many films since Rossellini’s up until the time he was writing in 1972, tended towards, what he calls, ‘a cinema of poetry’. Answering the question how poetry would be possible in the cinema he responds positively by introducing the idea of ‘free indirect discourse’. He defines this concept by comparing it to interior monologue.

Interior monologue is speech reanimated by the author for a character who may, at least ideally, be of his generation and share his economic and social class. The language [of the
author and the character] may therefore well be identical. The psychological and objective individuation of the character is not a question of language but of style. ‘Free indirect’ discourse is more naturalistic in that it is an actual direct discourse without quotation marks and thus implies the use of the language of the character (2005: pg. 175-176).\textsuperscript{53}

When ‘free indirect discourse’ operates in the cinema of Resnais and Olmi, it expresses states of mind, memory, and ways of seeing without spoken language limiting the scope of expression. This uniquely cinematic language does not pretentiously proclaim to contain all of the meaning these images may have for the characters whose thoughts they visualize. Rather, it allows for a number of interpretations behind a character’s ideas and actions.

Although Resnais and Olmi certainly both belong within the ‘cinema of poetry’ as described by Pasolini, they do have important differences and ultimately the effects of their styles differ greatly. Again from his interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, Olmi suggests that the difference between he and Resnais is that the French director’s style functions metaphysically (1987: pg. 112).\textsuperscript{54} If Olmi intends that Resnais’ method of editing is more prone to enable an exploration of individual existential issues, this assertion would explain a key difference between the two directors’ styles. Social concerns inspire the editing in

Olmi’s cinema, at least after *Il Posto* and *I fidanzati*, in a manner that renders them different from the motivations of exploring historical trauma that underlie Resnais’ films like *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), and *L’année dernière à Marienbad* (1961). In Olmi’s cinema his style poetically suggests that without social considerations man is meaningless.

... 

Returning to the disorienting cut made after Bruno has called his office about his accident, from his behavior so far since the collision occurred, no one sentiment expresses itself without co-mingling with other feelings that contradict and distort it. Even at the accident site, his profanity and expressed disbelief that he did not see the two men on the side of the road demonstrates frustration and surprise rather than remorse. But as he rides in the back of the car with the men to the hospital his concern that the man arrives safely seems to be motivated by genuine altruism. We can interpret the shot that recalls the incident (although again it is not definitely depicting Bruno’s recent accident) as instigated by varying and, perhaps, conflicting emotions and desires to revisit the scene of the accident. Although never appearing cold and selfishly concerned with how this unexpected event will affect him personally, we can sense that these thoughts accompany whatever other worries may run through his mind.

Bruno continues to wait at the office, and he receives a call from an attorney informing him the Carabinieri will arrive soon to inspect the vehicle involved in the accident, the doorman stops by to tell Bruno he is leaving and Bruno’s daughter suddenly appears. Waiting alone before his daughter arrives
prompts several other non-linear departures from this scene in the office. After
the doorman leaves, Bruno undresses and then a surprising cut carries us into
an unknown home. A handheld point-of-view shot walks through the doorway of
a living room, taking the area in, as if looking for someone, until the camera rests
on a woman, whom we later discover is Bruno’s wife, in a doorway on the
opposite side of the room (image 41). A close-up of the woman follows, and a
younger female voice off-screen asks, “Is it Dad?” Bruno’s wife responds
affirmatively and another cut returns us to the office, Bruno looking forward as if
his wife speaks to him in the present. One further cut back to Bruno’s wife in
close-up in the home is made, as she looks down. In the next shot Bruno also
lowers his gaze at the office, sighs and then walks to a chair to sit down. He
looks forward again and a cut brings us into another non-specific place and time,
now with the young woman from the office with whom Bruno had had a
relationship, looking distantly at a shaded window.
The following shot shows Bruno, now in the same location as the person he speaks with (in what appears to be a hotel), in a different suit from the one he wears after the accident. She must sense him looking at her, because in the next shot she turns her head to return his gaze. She turns out the light, rises and undresses as he watches her. But when she looks away, with a marked dispassionate glance towards the window, a colliding montage displays a series of images of her, and at the hotel again, Bruno seems upset. As he tries to reassure her, she responds coldly, and tells him that she acknowledges they are both there for the same thing, which, we assume, is sex.

We turn to the office once more, and then a sound bridge accompanies us to the home of Bruno’s ill colleague, Davoli, as the two walk together outside of the former’s home. Davoli functions as a realist raisonneur figure at this moment, informing Bruno that when he had his heart attack he experienced a re-visitation of thoughts and moments that he forgot. His reasons for not desiring to return to work seem valid and provide a moral comparison to Bruno, and of course to us, in order to question the priorities of our lives.

In this scene, the medium allows us to effectively time travel with Bruno as he journeys from one location to the next, conversations being revisited and seemingly occurring in the temporally central present where Bruno sits alone in this deserted office space. It presents reality as a combination of linear events and non-linear memories and/or imagined occurrences that impact our choices.

After interviews with carabinieri, lawyers and sitting through a manslaughter trial, Bruno, his wife, and daughter quietly celebrate at home,
Bruno found not guilty of any crime. A car arrives to pick up his daughter and Bruno and his wife are left at home alone, enjoying some peaceful moments now that the stress brought about by the accident has come to a conclusion. They sit in a darkened room in front of the television, and after his wife mentions that she would like to invite a family over, Bruno agrees and states that everything should return back to normal now (image 42). Bruno’s wife falls asleep against his shoulder as a voice on the television narrates a documentary. After he looks down at his wife a rapid cut is made to the scene of the accident and the injured worker before cutting back to Bruno beginning to doze off as well. We then see that the documentary on television is showing a program about workers before the film’s closing credits begin to scroll down the screen.

As the film ends, we remain uncertain whether or not Bruno has undergone any significant internal changes. His privileged social status has provided him with the ability to escape from the manslaughter trial relatively
unscathed. And yet the flashback that appears just before the credits implies that the part he played in the death of the worker still troubles him. The film places the viewer in the position of Bruno through the relationship between him and the program on television, inviting us to substitute the unfortunate worker with actual people outside of the film’s frame that political negligence and social divisions separate from the film’s audience. As has already been indicated, and will be reiterated further on, Olmi has repeatedly been accused of holding an apolitical stance in regard to the subjects his films cover. Such accusations ignore the political nature of moments such as this final scene, which although remaining open-ended without providing explicit instruction, clearly encourage active political thought and action.

**Durante l’estate**

Olmi does not readily fit into the categorization of a director of genre films; his *palme d’or* for *Tree of Wooden Clogs*, his awards from the Venice and Berlin film festivals, his two films available from the Criterion Collection all position him as a director of art cinema. And yet, without exaggerating the claim that he could also be considered a ‘genre’ filmmaker, Olmi has made a handful of biblical epics, a couple of historical biographies, a pirate adventure film, and even a romantic comedy with *Durante l’estate* (1971) [*In the Summertime*]. All of these
films take part in Italian film and arts traditions, while also descending from international cinematic parentage as well.

_Durante l’estate_ is one of Olmi’s unsung masterpieces, a comic work that uncovers the accepted borders the new Italy has formed around its inhabitants social behavior. Very little has been written about this film in or outside Italy after its initial release, and most of the writing done sums up the film in a sentence or two, sometimes with enthusiastic approval, which only continues to puzzle one as to why it has not received more attention nor brought its director more critical investigation. One of the only references in English that discusses the film at all beyond its name is in a film and video guide. Its author gives the film his highest rating and writes

The most telling sequence in this extraordinary film is that in which its protagonist, the ‘professor’, meets by chance an old college friend in a Milan bar: neither, each confesses, has fulfilled his ambitions but the friend lives in luxury while the professor lives in a mean world that is nevertheless one of kindness and of fantasy, if of his own making. Even by Olmi’s own standards, this is a film exhilarating in its perceptions.” (1984: pg. 224-225)55

The author’s praise was shared by others, sometimes with reservations. Noting that this 1971 film, like several of the director’s earlier films, contains, “An ostensibly neutral account that, we suddenly realize, is so subjective as to be

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nearly hallucinatory”, David Thompson remarks that *Durante l’estate* is “… The first, promising sign of comedy in Olmi with a note of Chaplinesque social criticism and a defense of eccentrics that veers towards whimsicality.” (2010: pg. 724)\(^{56}\) Although there had certainly been comic moments in Olmi’s previous work, markedly in *Il Posto* and *La Cotta*, this film actually possesses the structure of a romantic comedy, albeit a bittersweet one as the film concludes.

Indeed, *Durante l’estate* naturally reminds us of Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931), both in tone and its story and characters, a connection that all of the few that have written about or reviewed the film have failed to make, although several do link the film with Chaplin. The British actor/director was a hero and inspiration to the canonical Neo-Realist directors such as Rossellini and De Sica, the latter of these, Karl Schoonover, reports “Was obsessed with Chaplin.” (2012: pg.180)\(^{57}\) Chaplin’s Tramp and the social concern of many of the comedian’s shorts and most of his features would be of obvious appeal to both Olmi and the socially committed filmmakers of Post - WWII Italy. Olmi melds *City Lights*’ sweetness, political observations, and hopeless romantic devotion with his own style. As Thompson noted, in this film the director continues to blur time and events in a way that highlights the individual experience of reality, but here it is often, though emphatically not always, handled in collaboration with the film’s humor.


Olmi transforms Chaplin’s Tramp character into a map illustrator in Milan whom we only know by his childhood nickname ‘The Professor’ (Renato Paracchi) (again, many of Olmi’s characters remain without proper names). The Professor has a unique hobby in designing coats of arms and stories of noble and royal heritage for people in whose faces he sees traces of virtue and distinctive beauty. Like the blind heroine of Chaplin’s film, these ordinary people, deemed worthy of nobility by The Professor, also seem to have been neglected by the world in one way or another. When he senses these qualities in a person he approaches him or her subtly, pretending he has come across them by happenstance and attempts to sell them the idea that they stem from illustrious ancestry. He meets a girl (Rosanna Callegari) whom he ran across earlier and attempted to help after an unfortunate incident with a boyfriend. She rejects his aid but comes across The Professor again in her door-to-door vending job, selling toiletries. He seems to have fallen in love with the girl and despite her own misgivings about herself, he promises her that she is a princess.

At work, The Professor finds himself in an unfavorable position because he refuses to color the map in the way which the publisher requests but these work problems do not seem to bother him because he has principled reasons that prompt his refusal of the demands made. He continues his friendship with the girl, asking her to go out for a day at the park. Bored with the guide assigned to them and other tourists, The Professor and the girl venture off alone and find themselves before a flower exhibit. He tells the girl that he would like to name a rose after her but two officials of the exhibit interrupt the improvised title
ceremony. Offended, The Professor lands a solid kick on a shin of one of the officials and runs off, leaving the girl behind while he is pursued. He sprains his ankle in his escape before he makes his way home.

The next day he is arrested, we assume for the incident at the park. However it comes to light that a son of one of The Professor’s ‘noble’ customers has pressed charges against him for tricking his father into believing he was a royal. Other characters are questioned but only the girl defends him during the trial. He is found guilty and placed in jail, waving to his ‘princess’ outside from the bars of his cell as the film concludes.

The film commences with The Professor opening the shutters to his apartment. On a raised desk, he details a map. We hear the sound of a plane overhead (a noise that reappears throughout the film during significant moments and can be linked with the marking of time performed by Natale in *Il tempo si è fermato* and the artist from *Un certo giorno*) that guides us into the next shot of an empty field in the city. The cut suggests that The Professor is an imaginer, a creator of personalities, of the world that he draws on his desk. But unlike the novelist of *Il posto* and the lonely artist in *Un certo giorno*, the professor reaches out to those whose lives he envisions and involves them in his re-evaluations of their selves.

As the camera pans over the field we hear a woman and a man arguing as a car comes into our view. The woman gets out of the car and runs away from her pursuer across the field. We follow the woman as she runs into the city and then bumps into The Professor, arms full with his maps in a large portfolio. She
pushes him away from her but, despite her rudeness and sensing from her state that all is not well, he asks if he may assist her. She again shoves him away and he can do little but watch as she carries on.

Watching The Professor continue his journey after this encounter, we get a sense of some of his peculiarities. Like The Tramp, he is a loner, a figure of small stature, curly hair, and some odd mannerisms. Although we know from his apartment that he is doing well enough to support himself, his appearance is not handsome, neither in his apparel or physical bearing. As we arrive in the office of the encyclopedia editor that he is fulfilling a contract for, a secretary asks him to make himself comfortable while he waits for his appointment with his manager, and the film makes its first non-linear cut, signaling that Olmi will again employ his trademark editing style. But this temporal diversion differs little from the typical cinematic flashback sequence (*Durante l'estate* makes use of a less disorienting editing structure than *I fidanzati* or *Un certo giorno*). Events mostly follow a sequential order and character's interactions are easier to read according to a cause and effect chain. However, several sequences still utilize a type of flashback, and in at least one instance, a flashforward ([The Professor is seen doing research in the castle archives before the event that leads him to do so take place in the film]). It has the obvious function of communicating that The Professor has been drawn to the woman for some reason. But we also receive with this cut the first confirmation that he actively thinks of those with whom he crosses paths but does not know intimately. He is clearly thinking back to what
troubled this woman as he recalls her arms flailing at him when he literally reached out to her (image 43).

The manager arrives and after beckoning The Professor into his office, rips into the artist for not following basic coloring directions. The Professor defends his artistic choices by enlightening the manager with some historic context to provide reasons for his disobedience, but the manager will not listen, returning the maps and demanding they be fixed before their next meeting.

In his life, The Professor walks along to the beat of his own drummer and is unquestionably devoted to his artistic principles and we may find him funny, as we find Chaplin funny, partly because of his stubbornness and his refusal to conform to societal dictates of behavior and lifestyle. He is unmarried, not particularly interested in wealth, and retains the irregular habit in the dog-eat-dog world of the post-industrialized West of thinking about other people and their
concerns. Shortly after his appointment with his manager, he enters into a cafeteria and makes a phone call that goes unanswered (this occurs repeatedly throughout the film). He returns to the bar and has a drink after double-checking with the cashier that the phone works. When he turns back around he sees a cheerful bearded man, well dressed and groomed, that he recognizes. The Professor watches him, perhaps with a hint of envy, as the man seems to enjoy his conversation on the phone, and greets him when he has finished his conversation. The bearded man has no recollection of The Professor at first, and we are not positive if even after The Professor provides additional reminders the bearded man actually remembers him, but as they continue to talk it is clear that the two men have had very different fortunes after their school years. The Professor reveals he had to drop out of school and was unable to receive a bachelor’s degree after his father died while the bearded man is apparently wealthy, as evidenced by his invitation to The Professor to accompany him while he shops for a new luxury car. When the bearded man invites him over the next Sunday to see his color television (and after the sequence when The Professor joins a party at this acquaintance’s home), returning to the City Lights reading of the film, we are inclined to see this wealthy figure as The Millionaire to The Professor’s Tramp.

Shortly afterwards The Professor returns home to find that he has a letter from a customer that has accepted the offer to discover his noble heritage. As The Professor sits down to write the letter, stating it out loud as the pen places it on paper, we are taken to the photography shoot of a family, the shot at first
focused on the eldest male seated in front of the group (image 44). Crosscutting between The Professor dictating the letter to himself (even while in the shower) and the family posing for its photo reoccurs, the idea expressed through the imagery and editing that The Professor provides a heightened sense of self to the family, given the same opportunity through photography to imagine their worth for their own ancestors as was previously only available to royals, aristocrats and nobility by paying large sums of money to a painter to preserve their likenesses and legacy.

The film inserts several other cuts here of The Professor researching in a library and coloring a coat of arms that he has designed while he continues to read aloud the letter that he composes (image 45). We can see from the artistic process of The Professor that he is not a conman attempting to provide something useless to his customers for money. He asks only to be reimbursed
for research costs and the amount used to design the coat. Watching him color the coat of arms, we see him as an artist, not only as a creator and re-framer of perspective, but also as someone capable of perceiving in other people what no one else sees. The Professor actually believes that he is helping people and sees nothing wrong in ignoring the fact that his customers have no actual blood relation to nobility.

While sending his most recent creation to a customer at the post office, The Professor bumps into an elderly man that immediately fascinates him. He covertly watches for the man to exit the building and then catches the bus with him to follow him home. He sits next to the man and starts the design of a coat of arms in a pocket sketchbook. When the older man exits the bus at a train station, The Professor follows him, watching the man as he calls out the name “Ruggero” and walks back and forth along a train platform peering into windows. The Professor approaches the man and finds out that he was looking for his son.
The man thanks The Professor before heading to his apartment building. The Professor then sneaks into the building and discovers the name of the man, Querciai, by ringing his bell and watching as he answers the door.

In the scene, we witness the inspiration process for The Professor and the efforts he expends to fulfill his abnormal interest. But the older man does not seem to mind this strange figure following him around. In fact, the man’s courtesy when he is bumped into at the post office is the only suggestion we have, beyond a certain look, of what about this man captured The Professor’s attention. No one in the film ever comments on The Professor’s bizarre behavior, except at the end when the court finds his heraldry hobby to be a criminal activity. But as we watch him encounter new figures and reinvent their understandings of themselves, the film prepares us to accept this man’s oddness and question why he is different.

In a long shot that immediately follows The Professor’s surveillance of Querciai, the film frames The Professor in the gateway of the Castello Sforzesco, running into the courtyard and towards one of the castle’s archives (image 46). The composition of the shot restates an idea regarding The Professor’s practice of turning to the past to augment his customer’s visions of themselves that also corresponds with one of the main interests of Olmi’s history films. The castle gates leading to the courtyard are left open, welcoming tourists and citizens on their journey to and from work and other appointments, to walk among the ruins of former power. In the democratic world of post-fascist Italy, the past is theoretically no longer in the control of a select few such as aristocrats, nobles, royalty, nor a fascist government. The economic boom supposedly brought with it
the promise that all citizens could now take part in the privileges enjoyed by
former individuals of high social stature granted by their birth. However one of the
main theses of Durante l’estate is that the democratization of the past was a false
promise and that the balance of power in interpreting the past, and therefore the
present, has only been reshuffled.

Upon arriving at the archives The Professor persuades the manager to let
him look through the Q section where he locates a coat of arms that suits his
fancy and he copies it in his pocket sketchbook. He then returns home and writes
another letter, this time addressed to Mister Querciai, again dictating the
correspondence to himself as the film visually revisits the brief moments they
shared together. During this letter, The Professor’s methodology for selecting
those upon whom he bestows noble heritage reveals itself. He deems the
politeness and gentleness of Mister Querciai virtues worthy of recognition and
the highest praise. But if The Professor desires to reward refinement and civility, why was he so drawn to the woman that refused his assistance?

After an appointment with a colleague, in an elevator The Professor happens upon the troubled young woman he attempted to help at the beginning of the film. He enquires how she is doing now, but she has no recollection of their first meeting or why he would be asking about her welfare. When she gets out of the elevator, he awkwardly remains inside until she has had ample time to head in her own direction without them needing to converse any further for the present as he makes his way to the ornate home of his bearded school acquaintance. The Professor enters the home’s lobby alone a few moments prior to the arrival of the bearded man, accompanied by a young couple. The home is lavishly decorated with a contemporary design, devoid of any connection to traditional culture or significance and without pictures or suggestion of links to family and close friends. The Professor absorbs this unfamiliar surrounding, poking objects and attempting to determine their functions (image 47). When The Professor and the male guest sit down in front of a projector, the similarities between the bearded man and The Millionaire of Chaplin’s film becomes solidified. After he is asked how long he has known their host, The Professor praises him, only to be contradicted by the other man, stating that their host definitely lacks certain virtuous qualities, affirming that the man has few, if any, true friends. In Charles Maland’s description of the world of *City Light*’s Millionaire, many of the same self-absorbed characteristics described are found in the bearded man and his home. “The millionaire’s world… although one of economic prosperity, it is also a
schizophrenic world, shifting between celebration and coldness, welcoming inclusion and harsh exclusion, alcoholic camaraderie and suicidal sobriety.” (2007: pg. 77) The Professor’s face shows his disconcerted feelings as he comprehends the spiritual vapidity of this environment, his host and the two other guests. This, the film contends, is the end of the road whose only vision of success is financial in the culture that has developed in the rapid transformation of Italy after WWII. The pictures The Professor looks at from the projector, he is told by the other guest, are of the bearded man’s wife and son, who are nowhere to be seen (unless the son is the boy playing outside of the building when he entered). The female guest that flirted with the man she arrived with now has her arms around the bearded man, which meets with no comment from anyone. These are not people who desire to cultivate any sort of long term relationship with each other or in maintaining the ones they already have. None of them have any real interest in one another beyond company for getting drunk, a revelation

that dawns on The Professor as he rushes out of the house and we hear echoes of his host beseeching him to stay as he hurries home.

And just as the blind flower girl, alongside The Tramp, in Chaplin’s film provides a moral contrast to the millionaire’s selfishness, so, eventually, does the girl from earlier in the film, alongside The Professor, contradict the jejuneness of the bearded man. Her ethical evolution commences when she knocks on The Professor’s door selling bathroom products. He invites her in and buys some of her wares despite their marketing status as women’s items. Because he only has a large bill to pay for the items the two of them descend to the shops below to receive change and after insisting he grabs her heavy bag from her. A bar they enter has no change and The Professor again attempts to make a phone call that goes unanswered before they stop at a restaurant. The two converse while they walk and the girl laughs at The Professor’s eccentricities, not derisively, but in a way that indicates she appreciates his personality. She admits that even though she did not recognize him in the elevator, she does remember the day they ran into each other on the street when she was upset and apologizes for her behavior.

In the restaurant, the waiter assures them he can give them change as long as they decide to eat. Once seated the girl explains her love problems, an inability to stay in love with one man. The Professor empathetically offers her consolation and advice. When he fails to reach another friend by telephone, the girl observes that The Professor is the type of person that would not have many friends. He denies her claim by offering to introduce her to a friend of his that he
claims is an actual Count. The film immediately cuts to the night when The Professor executes this invitation by picking up the young lady in a taxi on the way to his friend’s house. On the journey there, The Professor assures her that despite his friend, Conte Carlo’s, nobility, he is just like everyone else.

Curious objects fill the space of the Count’s home and we now may have a further understanding of why The Professor shared the comment regarding the souls of objects’ makers with the girl. The count suggests that objects can have nobility and that in every object, even the most common ones, the soul of their maker reveals itself. The Count shows off several items in his collection, including the ‘violina’ that he is especially proud of. It is an automated musical cabinet made up of a number of violins. When the Count switches the cabinet on, a ring of violin bows circles inside of the cabinet and plays the instruments. After the Count recounts the history of the object to his guests, he places his hand on one of its shutters, and proclaims that, “This machine was not made by other machines, but by a human being”. He then states that if one places his or her hand where he has his, the cabinet feels as if it was a living, breathing thing (image 48).

The actual claims to Conte Carlo’s nobility are never verified, but The Professor’s certitude of the man’s singularity is qualified for him by the Count’s fondness for discovering people through objects. After showing them the ‘violina’, the Count plays a mechanical piano and the two guests ascend up-stairs to two chairs placed on the other side of the room to watch the Count play. The scene has already alluded to the film’s desire that we look on it as the expression of its
creators, including Olmi. The Count is another representation of the lonely figure in Olmi’s films that seeks to know others but has social obstacles. However, the chairs The Professor and the girl now sit in have the appearance of movie theater seats, and as they watch him play the piano, the film reminds us that we too are ultimately seeking the company and the acquaintance of others through watching this film. Although it may only be an object, like the ‘violina’, it can also appear to contain a living and breathing soul, or souls, within it that require a participant to recognize.

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One of the filmmakers that define Neo-Realism, Cesare Zavattini wrote his films with the idea that cinema has a moral imperative to magnify reality and the lives of those in our immediate environments who would otherwise remain invisible if attention was not drawn to them.
I believe that the world continues to evolve towards evil because we do not know the truth: we remain unaware of reality. The most necessary task for a man today consists in attempting to resolve, as best he can, the problem of this knowledge and lack of awareness. That is why the most urgent need of our times is **social contact, social awareness**. But no matter how artistically successful it may be, moral allegory is no longer enough. This awareness and contact must be direct. A hungry man, a downtrodden man, must be shown as he is, with his own first and last names. A story should never be constructed in which the hungry and the oppressed merely appear, for then everything changes, becomes less effective and far less moral (1978: pg. 72)\(^59\).

There were, of course, hungry and jobless men when *Durante l’estate* was made, but Olmi’s film focuses on the immediately present issue of increased alienation in the wake of the boom that he has explored in all of his works set in the contemporary period. However, this film ‘s lonely figure is a man who reaches out to others and possesses a perspective that prioritizes the warmth and pleasure he feels from other people that he recognizes as virtuous or as he would suggest, ‘noble’. The Professor seeks the truth that Zavattini speaks of through social contact. Unfortunately we find him different, naïve, and strange because

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his perspective and behavior clash with many of our own views of the world and how it operates.

... The relationship between this couple is strange; without a doubt, The Professor finds the girl attractive, but his motives for seeking the girl’s company are certainly not limited to a one night stand, and are also more than just an interest in having a romantic relationship. He finds joy in seeing others increase their self-confidence and worth. Although *Durante l’estate* is not a comedy of remarriage, it does feature that Cavellian genre’s fondness for play between the couple, at least on the woman’s side. The girl knows that the titles of nobility granted by The Professor have no actual genealogical claims. But their romance cannot exist as he lives his own separate world where he can hand out royal titles based on politeness and friendliness.

On her doorstep after their visit to The Count, The Professor tells her of his own royal status and then places his hand on her face in a ritualistic fashion, as if he is bestowing an actual title on her, to inform her that she is a princess from this moment on (image 49). The girl laughs quietly and when The Professor asks her why, she responds, “Princes and princesses don’t exist anymore.” He replies that there will be more and more princes and princesses, until everyone realizes their nobility.

A daytime excursion to a park follows where the pair wanders off from a tour group and discovers a flower naming ceremony. The event is roped off, leaving The Professor and the girl distanced from a well-dressed, wealthy group
of people. The MC invites a woman to come forward who seems to be having a flower named in her honor. Sighting some roses still behind the ropes, but away from the group’s attention, The Professor asks the girl to choose one of the flowers. When she selects one, he declares that from this moment forward she will bear the rose’s name and it will bear hers. Two of the event’s ushers rush over and interrupt the intimate ceremony, grabbing the rose and pushing the couple aside. When one of them refers to the girl as a ‘stronza’ (or a ‘bitch’), The Professor kicks the man in the shin in dignified anger (image 50). The Professor and the girl run off in separate directions and do not see one another again until the trial.

Violent acts rarely appear in Olmi’s work, and this is the only instance I am aware of when a character attacks someone else when not at war. Despite its comic tone (i.e. the clumsiness and The Professor’s lack of physical presence; the injured man’s anger as he dances on one leg and then throws a broken...
flower pot shard at his assailant), a sense of moral outrage hovers over the injustice of the scene. The sequence alludes to the absurdity of the hegemonic control of society conferred upon a select group of people based on wealth or birth. The Professor’s own system for assessing the worth of a person based on their merits mirrors the aspirations for character judgment of Western religious and moral traditions, and yet there is no tolerance for The Professor’s eccentricity within a society that claims to follow these philosophies.

Injuring his ankle after an elaborate escape from the park, The Professor returns home in need of some care, prompting him to call his landlord. The man’s kindness prompts The Professor to grab one of his coat of arms designs when the landlord steps out, and present it to him when he re-enters. The landlord leaves and when The Professor answers the door again, he surrenders immediately, without asking for cause, when a group of police officers fill his door
way. He is taken into custody and then put on trail, not for assault, but on charges of forging documents that grant false claims to noble ancestry. The prosecutors call the son of one of The Professor’s clients to bear witness against the accused alongside several others, including his ex-employer, the encyclopedia editor, a co-worker, and even The Professor’s Princess. None of their accusations seem very grave, and The Princess even makes an attempt to defend The Professor. The prosecuting attorney laughs at her remarks when she reiterates her title as a princess, though she interrupts him and informs him that he, at this moment, is not being a gentleman, a gesture The Professor receives gratefully.

In the concluding sequence, Olmi’s film recalls both the formal set-up and the invitation in the final shots of City Lights. The Princess walks toward a building, and a voice shouts out “Principessa”. She looks up and sees The Professor waving out to her (image 51). She waves back and smiles at him. A plane flies overhead that they both look towards (the plane again utilized as a signifier of the passage of time, of the world of financial progress, etc.). The girl then walks off camera before the final shot: a freeze frame of The Professor smiling and waving his hand out from his prison cell. We are not sure if the girl is coming to visit him, pick him up after he has served his time, or just walking by. Our view of the girl’s action here determines The Professor’s fate in the world. This ambiguity serves as a request to consider why society rejects The Professor and what we can do to include him as part of it. William Rothman writes that Chapin’s film requests a similar thoughtfulness from its audience.
By calling upon us to imagine that the screen is not a barrier, Chaplin calls upon us to reflect on the limits of the medium of film and to ask ourselves whether or not we wish for these limits to be transcended. Do we wish for the Tramp to be real, if that means we must give our love to a human being of flesh and blood? This is a philosophical question about the human capacity for love and for avoiding love. (2004: pg.54)\(^6\)

*Durante l'estate* also asks if we wish for its protagonist to be real, to be someone that does not seem out of place in contemporary Western civilization. The film maintains the Neo-Realist commitment to individuals inhabiting the outskirts of society. Although The Professor is not in immediate need of assistance like the

impoverished characters of *Germania: Anno Zero* (1948), *Ladri di Biciclette* (1948), or *Umberto D.* (1951), his exclusion from the world surrounding him asks if the new wealth brought about by financial success has not created a hostile and mean environment that has no room in it for love. The difficult question that then arises is (which gives rise to many other troublesome questions) would Italy have been better off without the boom after the War.

*La circostanza*[^61]

The origins of *La circostanza* (1974) [*The Circumstance*] were planted in Olmi’s imagination while making a piece for an advertising program for the RAI television network. The family featured in the piece had their lives fictionally adapted for *La Circostanza* without their consent and after seeing the film they informed the director that they recognized themselves in the film. However they were not upset but remained friends with the director, which indicates an important factor on the relationship between the film and its audience: we are

[^61]: Rather than discuss this film by narrative progression as I have up until this point, because of the many protagonists *La circostanza* has and the non-linear occurrences (i.e. flashbacks, fantasies etc.), I will look closely at this film by character, one after another.
never placed in a position to feel superior to any members of the family (2001: pg. 85-87)\(^\text{62}\).

The wealthy family of the film stems from a generation of Italians that could enter the middle class through study, marriage, fortune in business, etc., without being born into it. Their affluence, however, does not bring them into happiness. Olmi has not often had families at the center of his films, instead focusing, especially in the films discussed in the past two chapters, on individuals searching for others with whom they can form relationships. But this family suffers from a sense of alienation both from one another and from the rest of the world. Although many of the members of the family look for purpose, affection, and warmth outside of the home, they find that the world has less time for their concerns than those already held for them in their home.

In an article from 2002 accompanying an Olmi retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, noted film scholar Chris Fujiwara writes of the film

> The film has extraordinary fluidity: as Olmi’s short flashbacks overlap, it becomes difficult to tell whose subjectivity, if anyone’s, is organizing the narrative… In *La circostanza* especially, but also in his other films, Olmi’s jagged editing patterns create the sense that the characters are living not in the present moment but in a whirl of pasts, futures, and fantasies. His characters, mirroring us, hope and expect to

emerge intact at the other end of this everyday chaos. But in
I fidanzati, who knows what will happen after Giovanni’s one
and a half years in Sicily? And will the father in La
circostanza come to work tomorrow to find his desk cleared?
(2002)\(^63\).

Fujiwara’s description of the editing style of the film is on point, especially since
La circostanza features more than the usual amount of two characters that seem
to dominate point-of-view subjectivity in the rest of Olmi’s work. As the mixture of
“pasts, futures, and fantasies” continues we form ideas about their relationship
with each other that assist us in forming a mental narrative order, but by the end
of the film we are not completely sure if our version of events will match those
experienced by other viewers.

As the film introduces us to its characters, it also visually encapsulates
their interests, personalities, and what estranges them from their family. Laura
Riberti (Loredana Savelli), the mother, is a public notary and our first encounter
with her positions her as being married to her career rather than her husband,
Mr. Riberti (Gaetano Porre). She keeps up with work at her office while on
vacation with her daughter, Silvia (Raffaella Bianchi). After trying to reach her
family at home she calls her husband at his apartment to see if he has gone by
their house recently. Mr. Riberti is worried about his job in an economy that has
slowed down and with new working methods being implemented that are
unfamiliar to him. Their two adult sons live at home: Tommaso (Mario Sierci) who

has isolated himself in a back room where he designs electronic gadgets, and Beppe (Massimo Tabak) who has constructed a house on his parent’s property, near their farm, where he lives with his wife Anna (Barbara Pezzuto), who expects a child soon.

After a roadside accident that Laura happens upon, she takes an interest in an unconscious young man that she drives to a hospital. She consistently visits him and even decides to pay for a nicer room so that the boy can be in a cooler room. Silvia is in her mid-teens, discovering her sexuality and the difficulties that accompany romantic relationships with two boys. Tommaso has some friends that assist him with his projects, but none of these people appear close to him, and he desires parental approval and freedom to pursue his own interests. Beppe and Anna appear quite levelheaded, enjoying the simple life they have etched out for themselves and the new baby they await. But they also desire an independent existence from the rest of the Riberti family, preferring to stay in their own home after the baby is born than be assisted by Laura when she asks them to move into the main house with her.

The family’s disjointedness leaves it unprepared for many of the events in the lives of the parents and their children. After speaking with the boy when he awakes from his coma, Laura arrives at the hospital one day to find that the boy’s father has come and retrieved his injured son without any acknowledgement of her goodwill or the effort she invested in the relationship. Silvia is unable to communicate to either of the boys that pursue her. We may think of Silvia as selfish after her brother Beppe’s baby is born and she all but avoids going to see
the new addition to the family, apparently too self-involved to think about anything besides her uncertain romances. She and Tommaso both represent a generation of young Italians that struggle to find their own place in the world in an economy where they are not expected to inherit a family trade or business. Because of their unpredictable futures, they seem lost, unhappy, and unwilling to commit to friendships or romantic relationships. But Silvia’s affection for a blind friend (Giorgio Roncaglia) that loves Haydn demonstrates some hope that she can connect to others eventually and navigate her future. Tommaso, however, does poorly at school and treats his parents and several acquaintances coldly. At the end of the film, he drives alone on a highway, overtaking a truck transporting cows from his parent’s farm, with no destination in sight as the film’s closing credits scroll on screen.

La circostanza expresses Olmi’s stylistic interests in time and reality a few moments after the film begins and introduces us to Sylvia. Lounging on a bed in a swimsuit, she lays a book on her bed and caresses her wristwatch, which we later find out has been given to her by a lover that lives near her parent’s home (image 52). Repeatedly in Olmi’s cinema objects, music or sounds serve as pathways through time, memory and imagination, connecting a character’s subjectivity with the persons connected to the object (e.g. the pocket watch in La leggenda del santo bevitore, the sound of planes in I fidanzati and Durante l’estate, Chopin in Olmi’s segment of Tickets [2005]). At times these withdrawn

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64 Olmi feels uneasy about this final scene in the film because the actual boy that Tommaso is based on died in a car accident a few years after the film was finished. The director states that he is not a “shaman” but expresses that his discomfort by the scene is because he feels that “… In reality there are precise signs that pre-constitute an idea of destiny” 64 The scene also recalls the tragic conclusion of Dino Risi’s 1962 masterpiece Il sorpasso.
subjectivities from their present moments find reasons to become more socially aware as in *Tickets* and *santo bevitore*. And although we do not fault Silvia for her engrossment in her confusing romantic ordeals, a cold and unwelcoming demeanor does not make her as inviting of a character as The Professor.

From her bed we are transported to a non-specific place and time at night, where she stands face to face with the boy who has given her the watch before they embrace in a kiss. We then return to her in bed before another cut takes us to a scene when she is approached by her other lover, Fabrizio, at the poolside. Another cut follows, not returning to Silvia on the bed, but to a dark hallway during a moment when Fabrizio attempts to kiss her but she refuses him, turns her head and rushes into a changing room. This shot in the hallway is repeated many times in the film and does not take place in another specific scene, so Silvia may be fantasizing about this situation’s actual occurrence. Whatever the
case may be, with the exception of her blind friend, the concerns and presence of her family and others does not occupy her attention.

When the subjectivity guiding the film returns to Silvia at her parent’s vacation home, Silvia puts some clothes on over her bathing suit and rides a moped over to a friend’s house. The ornateness of this home and the Riberti home evoke Ancient Rome and traditional Catholicism in a manner that belies the lives of their residents. These decorations are nothing more than ruins for all the significance they hold for the members of these families. The sight of the beautiful statues, mosaics, and paintings in the home do not spark the senses of those who see them. The blind boy’s desire to fulfill his senses through listening to classical music and joining the choir at the conclusion of the film distinguishes him as someone who possesses a perceptive gift to Silvia and draws her to him. When she walks into the living room of the home after finding the swimming pool area empty, she spots the blind boy seated on the floor, music records sprawled beneath him. She greets him warmly when she notices him in the room, one of the only instances in the film when she smiles. He asks her to help him find a record with flowers on the sleeve. When she locates it he asks her if the sleeve is pink and she replies that she would say it was more of a salmon color than pink. While putting the record on he tells her that women are always fussy about colors. He informs Silvia that they are listening to Haydn’s “Notturno in F Major” and that he often listens to this record when she observes that it is a little scratched. As they sit together and listen to the music while they wait for the rest of their friends to arrive, the boy’s devotion to the music displays itself through his
pleased smile and reverent posture (image 53). Silvia's youth surely provides at least part of her inexpressiveness and her failure to communicate with her lovers, but the simple joy that listening to music provides the blind boy asserts that youth is not the only factor in causing Silvia to be so distant from her family and the rest of her friends.

At the conclusion of the film, after we witness the blind boy listening again to his favorite Haydn piece, and watching several brief scenes during the film when Silvia remains almost speechless with her lovers, we see her follow a car on her moped that drives the boy to a choir practice. She watches as he enters and then continues to pensively sit outside of the building. No discussion takes place nor has the film provided us with any conclusive reason why she has followed him. However, from their brief interactions and her curiosity in him we can infer that she envies the pleasure he receives from music and yearns for something in her own life that would incite a feeling akin to what her friend feels
as he walks into a rehearsal. Silvia’s lack of feeling and direction argue that while post-boom Italy has certainly given people the opportunity to be abundantly wealthy, along the way it has not fostered a culture that encourages hope in love, a hunger for knowledge, or the ability to appreciate beauty.

Tommaso serves as another example of this troubled young generation of Italians and part of his hopelessness can be attributed to a lack of support from his parents, especially his mother. Near the film’s beginning Laura Riberti speaks with her son on the telephone, chastising him for wasting his time on experimenting with his robots and electronics (what she calls “useless things”) instead of studying for exams. Although, Mr. Riberti is mostly absent from the lives of his children, Laura communicates to Tommaso that his father is worried about him. As this conversation has continued cuts have switched between Laura on the road, Tommaso at their home speaking on the phone, and a boy riding through a neighborhood on a motorcycle. After an abrupt cut-off from the conversation between mother and son when he asks what his father has to be worried over, we see the boy on the motorcycle crash into an over-turned trailer in the middle of the road (image 54). Before Laura reaches this scene, a number of pedestrians and other drivers pull the boy out of the flames and extinguish the fire with blankets. Laura drives up to the accident, and the boy is placed in her car with another witness and she speeds towards the hospital, stealing glances through her rear-view mirror at the severely burnt victim, his clothes scorched and his skin ashen grey. Once at the hospital, the doctors peel the burnt skin off of his face, causing Laura to wince and walk wistfully back to her car.
The editing structure of this sequence proposes that Laura feels a motherly concern for the accident victim that she currently does not demonstrate for her son, Tommaso. After Laura completes some shopping one day, she places her bags in the back seat of her car and finds a medallion that she reasons must have fallen off the injured boy. She takes it over to the hospital to find that the boy is still unconscious and that although his parents have been notified that their son was in an accident, they still have not visited him. Later, she stops by again to find that the boy has awoken and she introduces herself to him with a gentleness in tone that she does not use with her own children. When the boy breaks into tears, she offers to have the medallion fixed and before exiting the room pays for the boy to be in a nicer, cooler room.

At the film’s conclusion, an editing rhythm initiates that anticipates another disappointed relationship. As Laura drives towards the hospital, the film cuts
back and forth between her journey and a pleasant imagined visit between her and the boy when she would present him with the medallion that, she has discovered in a previous conversation, is a symbol between the boy and his girlfriend of a memorable day they shared together. When she finally arrives the door to his room opens, we see the boy look over in its direction, smiling to welcome his benefactress once again. But this time, in the reaction shot returning back to Laura, she disappointedly finds the boy’s bed empty, rolled up, no personal objects on the bedside table, and a cleaning lady tidying up the room. A nun then notifies her that the boy’s father finally came to take his son home.

Another example of personal spaces in Olmi’s cinema rendered impersonal by the absence of an individual and their personalization of their space occurs here. (image 55). In this occasion the spaces once held the vibrancy of life and the hope for relationships that these characters were not
receiving from their lives outside of these locations. The rooms’ barrenness then is a devastating emotional blow that augments the impression of loneliness and alienation between the characters in the films. For Laura this sense is pronounced in the closing moments of La circostanza by her husband’s insistence that she use a friend for office politics in his favor and a heated dinnertime exchange with Tommaso.

At several occasions in the film, we see the Riberti family eating dinner together, never especially warm nor ingratiating. In the last of these, only Beppe, his wife, and new child are not present. Mr. Riberti and Silvia read newspapers while Laura smokes and Tommaso sits, head in hands, disconsolate at the table. Laura addresses her son snidely, asking if he intends to study or waste time with “his things”. He replies that he knows they are useless, but everyone can have their own conception of what being useful means. But from his interactions in the film, and his own descriptions of the robot that he is creating (he describes his invention being created for the purpose of helping people think but he concedes he does not know what he wants to help them think about), he does not seem to possess a goal or significance in his own life for which he strives to be useful.

During one particular moment Tommaso and several listless friends find themselves committed to being of use. A few nameless figures hover around Tommaso, apparently attracted by his intelligence. One of these people is a young man whom Tommaso has little time for but tolerates even though he suspects the loiterer has a drug problem. But both Tommaso and this friend throw themselves in to help Beppe when Anna begins to give birth during a
heavy rainstorm. Beppe’s car gets stuck in the mud and so he carries her back into the home they have built. Tommaso and the friend run over to the tractor with Pietro, a worker that takes care of the Riberti’s farm. However, by the time the tractor has pulled the car out, Beepe asks Tommaso to go and call an ambulance because Anna has already started birthing the child.

This scene operates as the centerpiece of a film full of frustrated lives and unrealized potentials. Shots of the cows breathing in the night air at the conclusion of the birth and the ambience of the farm prefigure the simple beauty that emanates from the life of the farmers in L’albero degli zoccoli. Just as the relationship between the land and farmers provides a sense of fulfillment to the lives of the farmers in that film, during this scene of La circostanza a similar sentiment expresses the importance of maintaining some form of contact with nature and the roots of existence.

Both Tommaso and the friend seem excited about their role in bringing the baby into the world. However, when the friend stops by later to see how everyone fares, Laura practically kicks the boy and his girlfriend out when she is on her way out the door, waiting for them to leave before she sets out to give the medallion back to the boy at the hospital. As has occurred with many of the relationships in the film, a lack of communication and shortsightedness closes the vision of the protagonists to one another.

The film expresses Tommaso’s own feelings of isolation and unhappiness within his family in a brutal sequence displaying the slaughter of the farm’s cows (image 56). Shots of Tommaso waking up and then staring blankly ahead are
interspersed with the animals being shot in the head, and then skinned or beheaded with butcher’s knives. The suddenness of this violence disturbs us, perhaps even to a level of shock. Its purpose does not state itself obviously but awaits unraveling in the very last scene. In La Circostanza’s last few moments, Tommaso watches the family farmers load a truck full with live cattle. As the truck leaves, he follows it in his own car long enough for us to believe that he is assisting the farmers with their work. However, on a narrow stretch of highway he overtakes the truck with a clear road ahead in countryside, and the film concludes with a freeze frame looking out from behind the steering wheel.

As Fujiwara observed the film’s ending does aim for a sense of “Inconclusiveness and… mysticism”, but only because almost all of its protagonists have lost any sense of which direction they should move towards. The significance of the graphic cow-slaughtering scene does not readily lend itself to be interpreted, through a pseudo-Marxist reading, as an allusion to
society’s citizens as cows being led to slaughter. Rather the scene’s impact maintains that the world that exists in modernity has moved beyond a role when most of its citizens will have a direct relationship with nature in their work. Laura inherited the farm but she has only taken care of it indirectly, by hiring workers to carry on tradition. But for Tommaso, among the first generation of Italians born after the boom, a gap exists between that world and his own, but as the last shot implies, when he moves beyond that world he has no defined life before him. In Olmi’s history films, he returns to the religious and work traditions of Western civilization to which *La circostanza* alludes, not to submit that civilization regress and return wholly to the past, but to suggest some of the precious attributes that were cultivated during the periods he explores should be carried into whatever future awaits the post-boom world.
Chapter Three: The Apocalypse is a Happy Conclusion: Olmi’s Re-Visitations of Twentieth Century History

Olmi’s own approach to history can be previewed in the retelling of his life in his autobiography, L’appocalisse è un lieto fine: storia della mia vita e del nostro futuro (The Apocalypse is a Happy Conclusion: The Story of My Life and of Our Future). It begins with his youth and continues until he began making films for the Edison-Volta company, but thereafter the director tells stories about people dear to him, a squirrel he befriended in his backyard, and his feelings about climate change and hunger in third world countries, all appearing in non-chronological order. His recollections often appeal to the senses, recalling the food he ate at the shelter away from Milan to which he was relocated during World War II, or describing the field in which he first made love.

His autobiography correlates with his period films insistence that history is not to be looked on with nostalgia as eras and moments to wish we could return, but as sources of inspiration for ways in which we can adapt our present and future. In the introduction of his personal history Olmi writes, “I know I am near the conclusion of my time. On the calendar of life, the future has already signaled my date. But it does not scare me. I am in peace and I will not allow myself to be robbed of even a second of my serenity. If I look back, I also have remorse and regrets, like everyone, but that which I know now I could not have known then. Our judgment changes because we change.” (2013: Di dopo in dopo)65

65 “So di essere prossimo alla conclusione del mio tempo. Sul calendario della vita, il futuro ha già segnato la mia data. Ma non mi spaventa. Sono in pace e non mi faro rubare neppure un istante della mia serenità. Se mi guardo indietro, ho anch’io i miei rimorsi e rimpianti, come tutti, ma quello che oggi so allora non lo potevo sapere. Il nostro giudizio cambia perché cambiamo noi”. My translation from the Italian.
Olmi’s purpose then in revisiting history, like Rossellini’s comparatively well-known project to retell human history through films made for television, is instructional for the future. Adriano Aprà writes that Rossellini argued that human beings

Faced with the epochal challenge of the extraordinary evolution of the last centuries – from scientific to electronic civilization, the highest stage of the industrial revolution – need increasingly to use their own intelligence (the faculty they obtain from the cerebral cortex) to understand what is happening and orientate themselves. However – and this is the reason for the present crisis – humans, overwhelmed by fear, draw back from the responsibilities they have as thinking, rational creatures and retreat to the sub-cortex of the brain – its original, instinctive animal part. (2000: pgs. 127-128)

Olmi’s cinema also requires actively thinking viewers. His implementation of depictions of small, quiet everyday scenes coupled with his temporal amalgamations and a propensity to appeal to our senses in these films invites us to consider ideas and approaches to life from the past, both to contemplate epistemology itself and also whether such philosophies of life should be rekindled in the present.

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Considering the background and life of Pope John XXIII, it is difficult to imagine another director who would have been as well suited as Olmi to make a film on the recently deceased head of the Catholic Church. The fourth child of fourteen, Angelo Roncalli was born in 1881 to a peasant family of farmers in Bergamo. Although for many years after he became a priest he served in a diplomatic role for the Church, while young he supported an important strike of textile workers in Northern Italy to reduce their working hours. After becoming pope, he encouraged peace between East and West during the Cold War.

Ginsbourg stresses John XXIII’s role in providing a bridge of understanding between many of Italy’s political parties. “The integralism of [John XIII] gave way to a different conception of the church, based more on its spiritual and pastoral role than on its political, crusading and anti-Communist vocation. The possibility was open for a dialogue between Catholic and Marxist worlds… At the national level, Christian Democrats and Socialists were finally to come face to face.”

(2003: pgs. 259-161) For a Bergamese Catholic whose films refrain from overt political declarations and emphasize the essential value of love in human relationships, the life of Roncalli would hold obvious appeal.

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Instead of having an actor represent the adult Angelo Roncalli, Olmi casts Rod Steiger as a ‘mediator’ figure that witnesses the pope’s childhood, but as the film progresses, the filmmakers never attempt to make him look like the pope by applying makeup or wearing costumes befitting Roncalli’s earlier religious vocations. Harry Saltzman, of James Bond fame, produced *E venne un uomo*, and with Steiger’s presence this made it Olmi’s first work with major international players in the film industry. In the same year that *E venne un uomo* (1965) (*And a Man Came*; a.k.a. *A Man Named John*) was released, another film biography with a similar narrating device was shown on the BBC: Ken Russell’s excellent *The Debussy Film*. Russell’s film is bolder than Olmi’s film on Roncalli in its efforts to distance us from its narration and tells the life of the great French painter through a director and actors making a film about their subject in England. The film consistently insists that we are aware of the artificiality of the work whilst striving to characterize and discover the universality of the man through these filmmakers’ interactions and their efforts to re-evaluate the life of someone that lived in a different era, foreign to their own sensibilities and tastes. In comparison, Olmi’s film does not meet the audaciousness of the British film. The reverence shown to the pope after he becomes an adult undermines the film’s attempts to make the head of one of the world’s largest religions relatable, as the title itself, and much of the dialogue, implies was one of the film’s intentions. However, in the early sequences set in Bergamo (but in a few later scenes as well) *E venne un uomo* does succeed in adopting a relationship to its
subject that exhibits Olmi’s approach to history and prefigure the director’s superior historical films that would come later.

Deborah Young eloquently writes that in Olmi’s cinema

The forms of love- friendly, maternal, sentimental, erotic, platonic, spiritual- blend into a single sacred thread running through all his characters. It is the give-and-take by which they relate to each other and reach out, unconsciously, for their salvation. From the plucky student in Time Stood Still to Johannes De Medici, the noble warrior in The Profession of Arms, it girds them with a core of values that no landlord, employer, or war can shake. It’s what makes them human and in the last analysis, invincible (2001: 62).68

The pope’s capacity for love, and where this tendency gained root, is of integral importance in this, Olmi’s only biography film. Trailing a solemn ten-minute opening montage of still images epitomizing Roncalli’s life as the pope, the film abruptly shifts gears from the Vatican to an Italian highway behind the wheel of a car driven by Rod Steiger. Although this introduction clarifies the institutional nature of this film, it does offer the suggestion that glimpses of the humanity of the pope will be accessed through the formation of his character. A narrator in the montage announces that Steiger would play one of “us” because, out of respect, the film does not want to attempt to recreate the pope.

As he travels to Roncalli’s birthplace he enters further and further into a provincial setting. Although this journey into the countryside connotes that the mediator figure travels into the past, there were certain areas of Italy at this time that had effectively remained in the past at the outset of the boom, as the Sicily of I fidanzati attests. Prior to arriving at the birth, a man struggles to move a cart pulled by a donkey out of the middle of the road, preventing Steiger from driving ahead (image 57). For most viewers of E venne un uomo this moment marks an entrance into a foreign world, separate from the identities and modes of existing that came into being following the industrialization of many nations in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before reaching the Roncalli home, we spot other individuals accompanied by horses or cows walking along the roadside, foreshadowing the humble circumstances found once the mediator arrives at his destination.

As night falls, Steiger stops in front of a home in a small town in the province of Bergamo named Sotto il monte (in English “under the mountain”),
although now its official name is Sotto il monte Giovanni XXIII, including the name of the pope) and we see a couple of people assisting a middle-aged pregnant woman in front of a building that appears to be a cascina, like those featured in L’albero degli zoccoli and briefly in Il posto and La circostanza. The film claims that Roncalli’s actual childhood home is being used for the location shown. When the woman enters her room, the film cuts away to the surrounding location, at first with images of the cascina, the sounds of a ringing church bell, the moos of cows and roosters’ crows. But shots of a bakery and a bus driving off follow in what we imagine is the surrounding area in the present.

The subtle drifts in time that occur around the birth and the childhood of the future pope reveals that the beauty and simplicity of this small town that produced the virtues instilled in the boy does not of necessity exist in the past. In the brief impressions of this area, an air of quiet adjustment prevails over whatever alterations each day brings, the workers we see in the contemporary bakery performing their duties and receiving satisfaction from labor. Their attitudes and conservation of a simple way of life may remind us of the description of the ‘proles’ and the singing washerwoman Winston spots from his window in Orwell’s 1984. “Her voice floated upward with the sweet summer air… One had the feeling that she would have been perfectly content, if the June evening had been endless and the supply of clothes inexhaustible, to remain there for a thousand years, pegging out diapers and singing rubbish." (2008: Part II, Chapter IV)69 These highlighted figures featured here and in L’albero degli zoccoli do not fit as ‘noble savage’ types praised for a mysterious moral fiber

falsely inherited from an exotic culture. The moral character of these individuals stems from a sense of community, a dignity in their work, and a relationship maintained with the natural world. When the morning comes we have returned to the past and a storm rolls in and welcomes the birth of Angelo Roncalli. A doctor, a few family and friends stand by the bedside as the newborn is placed in warm clothes and placed under the covers in bed near his mother (image 58).

Dislocating us temporally to stress the reconstruction of this man’s life and the imaginary nature of this film that pretends to represent the reality of Roncalli’s life, the film momentarily removes us from this peaceful scene to another storm where Steiger stands under an umbrella outside the Vatican. The purpose of this occasion distancing us from the narrative directly restates through the mediator that before he passed on, we may feel as if we knew the pope, but actually this was just a public personage, a figure created for popular imagination. We then see worshippers kneeling in the rain as the mediator expresses the desire
experienced after a death to pore through materials about the recently deceased in an effort to understand them better. Steiger himself is shown reading the pope’s diary (the dialogue of the film spoken by Steiger is taken from this source) before we turn again to the cascina and then quickly to a church and the baptism of the baby, who is unwell, encouraged by the child’s uncle Saverio because “It is a good thing.”

Watching the baptism from a secluded corner of the church, the mediator tells us “These same things happened in these same places, many years ago on November 25th 1881.” He continues, stating that although all of the people that were originally involved in this story have now passed on, objects remain including the church, and the house in which he was born that now functions as a museum. He also discloses that the actors used during this sequence are non-professionals selected from Sotto il monte. For any cinephile familiar with the traits of Neo-Realism these formal choices evoke the canonical era of Neo-Realist cinema. But as noted previously in Chapter 1, the utilization of non-studio locations and non-professional actors does not signify that Neo-Realism, or E venne un uomo, strive to record “reality” or recreate the ontological wholeness of a moment in time. As was also stated in the first chapter, many film scholars have fundamentally misinterpreted the writings of Neo-Realism’s most fervent supporter, André Bazin, in misreading his use of the word “reality” to argue that the French film critic was suggesting that the camera records the world as it is. These choices reflect modernist sensibilities, aware of the many perspectives and interpretations of existence, employing these techniques to augment viewer
awareness and also in an attempt to recreate a spiritual base in which we can re-
interpret the world, our relationships, and in the case of this film, history and the
life of a man. In his aesthetic study of several canonical Neo-Realist works,
Christopher Wagstaff writes, “We find ourselves questioning whether
representation can really be privileged over narrative and rhetoric, whether Neo-
Realism can so easily be opposed to formalism and modernism, whether
neorealism might not rather be a point of departure than of arrival, and whether
Antonioni and Fellini in 1960 can so clearly be described as ‘breaking away’ from
neorealism.” (2007: pg. 405)\textsuperscript{70}. No, Fellini, Antonioni, Pasolini, Bertolucci, and
Olmi, among many of the other Italian filmmakers that rose to international
acclaim in the 1960s, actually did not break away from Neo-Realism. However,
they and the original canonical Neo-Realist directors adapted the aesthetic
tendencies to the realities of Italy shifting around them.

Among the main figures of post-canonical Neo-Realist film, for Olmi, and
to some degree Pasolini (who also originated from the north (Friuli), in even
poorer circumstances than Olmi), the past and traditional lifestyles of the working
class retain something sacred through their labor that the industrialized world has
lost. Interacting with these re-created realities on the screen hopefully grants us
access to these worlds. Watching them work, the actors portraying the family and
neighbors of the Roncallis appear to have been selected because they were
already farmers and/or laborers (image 59). We see the young boy watching his
family work at the wine press and sifting wheat, reciting the Ave Maria prayer

together in Latin during Christmas festivities in front of a family nativity set. In a very tender scene, and one that also must strike a personal chord with the director, Angelo’s uncle carries him upstairs and lays him down in bed in a vegetable storage room. Putting the child to bed, and continuing in a scene where we actually see Saverio reading from the Bible to the boy lying at the foot of the bed, his voice off-screen reads Matthew 24: 29 – 31:

29 Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: 30 And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and
they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

As the nephew listens attentively, he looks over at the wall facing him, on the other side of his uncle’s bed and sees a crucifix upon which Christ hangs. We sense the birth of religious sentiment in the child, cultivated here among his family’s labor, a spirituality linked to nature, its seasons and symbolic significance to existence. Although the scriptures describe the apocalypse often in ways that prompt trepidation, the concluding verse promises a happy reunion, the beginning of a felicitous new era. This bittersweet conclusion appears to have an affect on the child. As he looks over at the Christ figure, we imagine that he accepts the harshness of the sweat and toil promised to Adam and Eve upon exiting the Garden of Eden, and that he witnesses in the work of his family, in exchange for eternal happiness in heaven.

…

Fellini’s Dream: The Four Brothers and The Diffusion of The Fish Bomb

The title of Olmi’s autobiography, and several chapters in the book, reference the Book of Revelations in the New Testament’s comprehension of the Christian apocalypse as a happy event in a vein similar to that understood by young Angelo hearing Matthew’s prophecy of Christ’s Second Coming. It also alludes to his interpretation of one of Federico Fellini’s dreams that Olmi was slated to direct in the author’s vision. Posthumously, Fellini’s daily notebook
interpretations and drawings of his nightly dreams were published in Italy in 2007:

Dream of the fourth courageous little brother who unhooked the big, dangerously radioactive fish stuffed with TNT, rendering it harmless. (We can tell the fish is no longer dangerous by the eye shooting blood.) The four courageous little brothers will be given awards during a public ceremony, all of them will feel moved and Ermanno Olmi can make a very beautiful film of it (2008: pgs. 78, 483).\footnote{Fellini, Federico. The Book of Dreams. Eds. Tullio Kezich and Vittorio Boarini. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2008. Print.}

Olmi relates that he has re-interpreted the cartoonish drawing and the notes repeatedly since he was made aware of it. He feels that Fellini foresaw this image at the conclusion of \textit{La dolce vita} (1960), when Marcello and friends stumble upon a monstrous creature pulled in from the ocean by fishermen. The open eyes of the creature preoccupy the camera and Marcello asks himself what it looks at, despite the fishermen insisting that it is dead. Olmi suggests that for Fellini, the monster of his film and his dream symbolize an apocalyptic punishment for humanity’s corrupt existence. Olmi himself deciphers the fish of the dream as an expression of the world’s wickedness, its desire to destroy itself (earlier in the book he discusses his fears of climate change, and the contemporary wars waged across the globe). He then offers his explanation of the four boys as the four horsemen of the apocalypse, ushering in a new era of peace and love. Shortly thereafter, the section ends quoting two verses from
Revelations, Chapter 22 vs. 5 and Chapter 21 vs. 4 in between which he writes
“The apocalypse is a happy conclusion”\textsuperscript{72}: “22 vs. 5 And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever… 21 vs. 4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” (2013: I quattro fratellini)\textsuperscript{73}

This insightful analysis signals to us that Olmi’s own background and philosophy provides him with a similar attitude to the future pope and has a hopeful eye towards the future despite the problems that humanity contemporarily faces, remaining mindful that an ending also signifies a new beginning. John XXIII’s desire to pave the road for peace and a new Italy following the cataclysmic devastation of World War II runs parallel to the oft-repeated theme of Olmi’s historical films revealing an optimism for whatever lies ahead in the world’s ability to readjust itself in the past.

... 

In another magnificent, and also sweetly comic, scene of the future pope’s formation, after a day of Catholic school and guidance in his role as an altar boy, the young Angelo plays soccer with other students in the backyard of the church. When a kick sends the ball into a neighboring field, the boys discover pumpkins,

\textsuperscript{72} In Italian the Book of Revelations is entitled “Apocalisse”, which in English would, of course, translate as “apocalypse”.
which with an air of triumph and amidst cheers they pick up and carry to their homes with the pride of their findings, Angelo still in his altar-boy robes. As he appears at the doors, arms full with a pumpkin roughly a quarter of his own size, his uncle chastises him for taking something that does not belong to him, and orders him to take the fruit back (image 60). The family seated at the table laughs quietly at the young boy, although with so many mouths to feed they could use the food without the farmer being any the wiser.

Angelo returns the pumpkin, finding the farmer at work. A close-up of the boy exposes his face covered with roughhousing bruises and what looks like an unholy mixture of berry and candy stains with dirt, stressing the naturalness of the boy’s behavior and his need for civil and spiritual education. He informs the farmer that his uncle told him he needed to bring back the pumpkin. The farmer enquires who his uncle is and upon receiving the answer asks if Angelo has been
baptized. The boy responds affirmatively, and the farmer stares at the boy a moment, and then, without another word, returns to the task at hand as the boy sets the fruit down and runs off.

Immediately following this scene, the film leads us to the moment when the farmer rewards the boy and his family for their instillation of honesty into Angelo. The farmer finds Angelo at table attending to his studies while the rest of his family has gone out to a nearby town. He enters and lays down a large sack, as Angelo looks on, worried perhaps that the farmer will deal out some punishment for his adolescent knavery. Whatever worries the boy may have held were unwarranted because after placing four large pumpkins on the table, the man asks the boy to tell his uncle that ‘Matteo of the pumpkins’ had been there and that Saverio is a gentleman. No whiff of moral superiority hovers above the scene nor does any type of undue saintliness surround the young boy. When Matteo exits, a cut reveals a baby in a basket placed by the boy to watch over (image 61). The baby cries and Angelo sets aside his work and gives loving attention to the infant. At this instance in the film, prior to Angelo receiving formal training to become a priest, we grasp the film’s intent to stress that what made this young boy into the leader of the largest Christian organization in the world, and as the film suggests, a great man, were simple principles implanted in the boy through the moral lessons taught to him by his family, neighbors, through the fulfillment provided through work and offering a hand when needed.
Although some compelling moments can be found in the rest of the film, much of it does not measure up to the beauty and sense of the sacred in the early childhood sequences. Later in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, Olmi would find an appropriate film in which he could extend his observations of the elegant simplicity found in the farming sequences of *A Man Named John*.

*I recuperanti*

In the late historian Edmund S. Morgan’s children’s book *So What About History?*, the author begins “‘History is bunk,’ said Henry Ford. He would have been closer if he had said, ‘History is junk.’” Further on he explains this addendum “All junk has a history, and one way of studying history is to study
junk. You can find out a good deal about people by studying their junk piles. A thousand years from now, when our cars and washing machines and maybe our houses and towns have become buried junk, somebody may dig them up and try to figure out what sort of people we were." (1969: pgs.3-5, 12)\textsuperscript{74} As an audience, we participate with filmmakers in digging up historical junk whenever we view a work set in the past, becoming amateur historians in giving history significance in the present. However, unlike the waste of twentieth century America, the junk recuperated in Olmi’s 1970 feature \textit{I recuperanti} (\textit{The Scavengers}) epitomizes the tensions undergone in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century. The unearthed items (bombs, grenades, German bullets, etc) attest to a continuous struggle and the occupation of the land by foreign armies. Legend has it that a battleship was dismantled and hidden in the Italian Alps near Asiago (where the Olmi family made its home) that the two protagonists seek as if it was The Holy Grail. The film charges this refuse, dug up from two world wars by the eponymous scavengers, with a symbolism that carried significant weight into the contemporary present when \textit{I recuperanti} was released.

The film takes place in 1945, immediately following the end of World War II in Italy. Gianni (Andreino Carli) returns home from the war by foot, informing curious bystanders, perhaps anxious about the state of their own loved ones away at war, of his route through France, Poland, Bohemia and Germany adding, when asked, that many would soon follow (image 62). We discover that he was a prisoner of war at sometime during the horrible years spent in defense of a government on its last legs. Upon arrival, he learns his father has re-married a

much younger woman and that his younger brother prepares to depart for
Australia because of the lack of work available locally. When he finishes
unpacking the few items he hauled back home from the War, he hides himself
near the home of the lover he left behind, Elsa (Alessandra Micheletto) until she
spots him and they promptly renew their relationship. Gianni would like to marry
Elsa, but they lack the funds to commence a life together and for a while he feels
desperate for work, even considering going to Australia with his brother hopefully
to make enough money for a few years to return and begin a family. He joins a
group of unemployed men that initiate their own lumber business without
sanction from the authorities. When the men receive notice of egregiously large
fines for the timber they have already cut down, they disband and cease their
efforts. One night after a difficult talk with Elsa about their future, the
inharmonious singing and rumblings of an old man are heard. “Il vecchio Du”
( old man Du) ( catches the younger man staring at him and gruffly invites him to
come over and chat. Du taunts him playfully during their conversation while the young man hints that he struggles for work. Du encourages Gianni to work with him and not conform to the schedules of society, the older man insisting that the freshly returned soldier would again lack freedom. Du promises ample compensation, showing Gianni a wad of bills from his pockets, although his drunkenness undercuts his claims.

Because of his pressing need for work, Gianni heads into the mountains until the dissonant tones of the established scavenger's songs lead him to Du. Du instructs him in the trade of scavenging, teaching him how to locate 'treasures' of hidden weaponry and explosives from wars held in the area over the past thirty years. Gianni begins living with his tutor in Du's cabin, isolated from the surrounding neighborhoods. Elsa is unhappy with her fiancé's new job, afraid of the dangers in digging for bombs and other deadly materials, even telling Gianni that she would rather he be in Australia than putting his life in peril to remain close to her. The setback in his relationship only serves to inspire him to devote more to his work, surprising a confounded Du one day with a metal detector bought with money earned during his time at war. Bad news reaches the two co-workers when it is revealed that several other scavengers have been killed at work, encouraged to take advantage of an increased trading rate for the destructive items they have unearthed. This incident and Elsa's concern persuade Gianni to take construction work that has recently become offered. Du happens upon him one day questioning his friend and insulting his decision by implying that he is now a slave and no more than a sheep.
The two chief relationships of *I recuperanti* reflect the rapport in Olmi’s earlier films, especially between Natale and Roberto in *Time Stood Still* and the troubled romance of Giovanni and Lilianna in *I fidanzati*. The opening sequence of the 1970 film also reminds us of the vast snowcapped mountain valley surrounding the hydroelectric dam in the director’s first fiction film and the countryside of Sicily explored by Giovanni (image 63). The presence of the mountains throughout the film both promotes the freedom cherished by Du and also frightens us with its enormousness, reminding us of the boundless universe and our lack of knowledge in all things. Although Olmi’s natural landscapes do not evoke John Ford’s style in the way they are framed or bear any resemblance to Monument Valley, in the Italian director’s films nature also serves as a stage for future aspirations and the development of the characters’, and our own, sense of existence, calling upon the timelessness of the world to put the present in perspective. Tag Gallagher’s comments on the role of the landscape initiating in
cinema with *Stagecoach* (1939) could also be applied to the sweeping shots of mountains and valleys of *I recuperanti*. “With *Stagecoach* a new magnitude of exteriority enters cinema, one touched on previously by *Tabu* and *Nanook*: a consciousness expanding forcibly; an alienated stare at the world’s vastness, at an immensity embarrassing our trepidant love (rather like the mixture of passion and alienation with which nature is confronted in Rossellini’s Bergman movies). “ (1986: pgs. 146-147)\textsuperscript{75} The role nature plays, then, in the relationship between Gianni and Du is essential, underscoring the differences in the two men’s attitudes towards life and the future by serving as a backdrop for the roles they want to carve out for themselves from the world.

On his way home Gianni stops at a bar where his brother comes searching for him after hearing talk that the ex-solider had returned home. On the walk home, his brother informs him of his father’s new wife, Margherita, whom is around thirty years her husband’s junior, roughly the same age as Gianni. The brother expresses his belief that while he was hiding from the draft in the mountains his father re-married because he did not want to be alone. As in Olmi’s boom and post-boom films, the theme of overcoming an alienation inflicted by national problems appears here as well. However, the period setting of *I recuperanti* reminds us that the spread of international capitalism in Italy after the war did not create alienation; it only disseminated it more thoroughly. When we see Margherita together with his father, Gianni’s own romantic conflict that threatens to alienate him from Elsa lingers in these scenes. The War had already

separated them for long enough and limited their communication to the point that
he questions whether or not he still has a place in her heart.

After making enquires in the community about work opportunities, he
abandons the normal avenues to finding a job when he grasps that many would-
be laborers cannot find positions locally and joins a group of men in a makeshift
lumber crew (image 64). The group’s efforts to construct a way of life out of what
they have at hand reminds us of Natale’s role as a bricoleur in Il tempo si è
fermato, not only in claiming the timber from nature as a gift, but they also locate
unused machinery, an abandoned factory and equipment to assist their inventive
industry. But unlike Natale, this group’s work is brought to a halt after repeated
threats from local officials and an official notification of fines and further legal
action if they persist in their work. In line with the rest of Olmi’s cinema, I
recuperanti never makes any direct political statements but within the context of
the rest of the film the government’s interference here, rather than when Gianni
and the many other scavengers are being of use to the government and large businesses by finding metal that can be recycled perhaps, we may assume, into weapons and parts for future wars indicates that certain elements of totalitarianism still linger on even after fascism was ostensibly defeated.

Feeling dejected after he has become unemployed and watching his father enter into a bedroom with his young bride, Gianni first heads out after his brother who is meeting with the recruiter sending workers off to Australia but then ends up standing outside Elsa’s window. He has had conversations with his own father and with his fiancé’s about going abroad to establish themselves. Elsa’s father informed him that the situation was not much different when he was young and had to go to America to earn enough to marry Elsa’s mother. Much of what he feels about his own destiny and the uncomfortable living situation residing with his father who is sleeping with a woman his own age goes unspoken and we sense the frustration festering within him when he approaches Elsa. After leaving her in tears by telling her that he has no other option besides leaving and trying to make money so he can return and marry her, Gianni cannot locate his brother nor the recruiter and decides to return home. At this moment, he hears the drunken singing and rambling of Du, who asks Gianni if he would like to join him for a drink.

In our first impressions of this singular character, Du’s mannerisms, dress, and grooming indicate to us that he is a hobo, that Gianni should ignore the old man’s invitations (image 65). But Du has an attractive sense of *joie du vivre* that radiates from him among the buzzing and chirping sounds he produces between
songs and growls. Lunari, the professional shepherd and scavenger who plays Du, was acting in his first role at 80 years old. Tullio Kezich (filmmaker, journalist and biographer of Fellini), who co-wrote the screenplay, reports that they found the old man in a manner similar to Gianni’s own discovery in the film. Lunardi approached Kezich, Olmi, and Mario Rigioni Stern at a table in a bar singing cheerfully because it was his birthday. He told the filmmakers of his life for over an hour and left such an impression on them that they felt compelled to make him part of the project (2004: pgs. 30-31)\(^7\)

The man’s charm is too much to resist and finally brings Gianni to approach him when he begins smoking an empty pipe and the younger man offers some of his tobacco he has on hand for his own cigarettes. Gianni recognizes Du from around the village but admits he thought that he had passed away. Walking away and expressing his worries over his inability to find work, Du follows him and tells him of all the ‘treasures’ he finds

in the mountains, including a legendary battleship, dismantled and hidden for
safekeeping.

Gianni’s desperation and willingness to place a last hope in staying near
his fiancé, even if he must have known it would be hazardous, carries him into
the mountains after seeing his brother onto a bus as his sibling begins his
journey to Australia. During his ascension to find Du, we glimpse the mountains
surrounding the old man’s cabin, re-emphasizing the wondrous landscape that
feeds Du’s taste

for a free, but isolated, existence (image 66). Having a look around to ascertain
whether or not Du is at home, Gianni spots empty metal casings, clearly utilized
as a type of missile or artillery during wartime. Discordant tones sung nearby
guide Gianni to the older man constructing an explosion to facilitate his access to
some discarded metal scraps by creating a cave in the mountain. When the
young man asks Du what he blew up, Du responds “152 Germans, loaded with
gas, and 149 French”. Puzzled as we are, Gianni presses the old man to explain
himself. Du apparently knows a great deal about the battles fought in the area
during the 1st World War and suggests that French soldiers were killed because
of a friendly fire incident; the blast incited a flashback for Du, although he does
not make any claims that he was present when these battles were fought.

Back at the cabin, they sort through the seemingly useless items accompanied
by Du’s commentary revealing what each item can be used for or into which
objects they can be formed. As they eat lunch, Gianni states he did not know that
this kind of work or that ‘recuperanti’ existed anymore, that he believed they had all vanished after the last war. Du tells him that scavengers will discover metal in the area for over 2,000 years because of how many bullets and other weapons were fired in action. When he asks if the old man’s name stems from the German word for ‘you’ or if he earned the name fighting with the Austrians, Du does not answer directly but insists that he is “International. American, Austrian, Japanese, Italian, and Brescian… I am for taking away all borders, because that’s how I lived, always by myself, and without needing anyone.” Du’s sense of freedom, unbounded by governmentally recognized borders, and his proclaimed self-reliance, quite easily allows us to associate him with the American Transcendentalists such as Whitman and Thoreau. His all-inclusiveness evokes Whitman’s spirit in poems such as “This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful”.

This moment yearning and thoughtful sitting alone/ It seems to me there are other men yearning/ and thoughtful, / It
seems to me I can look over and behold them in Germany, / 
Italy, France, Spain, / Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia 
or Japan, talking/ other dialects, / And it seems to me if I 
could know those men I should/ become attached to them as 
I do to men in my own lands, / O I know we should be 
brethren and lovers, / I know I should be happy with them.

(2004: pg. 160)\textsuperscript{77}

Although Du claims a kinship with all people and equality with those of other 
nationalities, the hermit’s life he leads, to some degree, repudiates these claims 
and limits our identification of him aside the Transcendentalists. Also, because of 
his unknown history, the only verifiable evidence to Du’s internationality is the 
name he is known by, which he may have given himself. Thus his reasons for 
wanting to be united with the rest of mankind remains a mystery to us. But his 
character does reveal that the only antagonism he holds towards others displays 
its self when he feels people renounce their natural freedoms.

Like Thoreau, Du’s freedom exists complexly, partly because the old man 
perceives the complicated status of his freedom, the natural contradiction of his 
need for Gianni’s assistance (like Thoreau’s need for aid in constructing his 
cabin), and also because he knows that as much as he accepts society he has 
strengthened the enclosure in which it imprisons him. In a brilliant passage on 
Walden the Emersonian philosopher, Stanley Cavell illustrates Thoreau’s 
predicament. Cavell makes an illuminating comparison to Rousseau, which 
ultimately applies to Gianni’s own desire as an ex-prisoner of war in I recuperanti

to be free to live and work in his birthplace but understanding by the film’s
conclusion that at some point he has to make a concession.

It is not the first time in our literature, and it will not be the
last, in which society is viewed as a prison. As with Plato’s
cave, the path out is as arduous as the one the Republic
requires of philosophers – and like the Republic, Walden is
presided over by the sun, and begins with a stripping away
of false necessities. Its opening visions of self-torture and of
eternal labors and self-enslavement seem to me an
enactment of the greatest opening line among our texts of
social existence: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in
chains.” What I take Rousseau to mean is that the way man
is in bondage is comprehensible only of the creature who is,
onologically, free. Human societies, as we know them, could
not exist except with each individual’s choosing not to
exercise freedom. To choose freedom would be to choose
freedom for all (to make the will general); the alternative is
that we choose partially, i.e., to further our privilege or party.
The social contract is nowhere in existence, because we do
not will it; therefore the undeniable bonds between us are
secured by our obedience to agreements and compacts that
are being made among ourselves as individuals acting
privately and in secret, not among ourselves as citizens
acting openly in behalf of the polis. The logic of our position is that we are conspirators. If this is false, it is paranoid; if it is not, we are crazy (1992: pg. 87)\textsuperscript{78}.

Du does not provide us or Gianni, or apparently anyone else, with his personal history but for whatever reason, the film leads us to suspect that the war led him to the life of a hermit, he refuses to engage with the world, attempting to preserve as much freedom as living only with the comforts nature can provide him. Whether Du’s reluctance to bind himself socially with others was caused by his experiences in war or some other reason for his self-exclusion from the rest of the world, this condition prevents him from accepting the caveat, as expressed by Cavell, contained in the joining of any society, even those that promote themselves as free. And his refusal to make an exception to his freedom ultimately limits this freedom.

Gianni longs for a freedom that will enable him to continue living in Asiago, remaining close to Elsa and capable of supporting their desired marriage through his own choice of labor locally. In almost all of Olmi’s films of the boom and post-boom, many characters make grave personal sacrifices to assure financial stability that cripple their familial and romantic lives. Gianni strives to pursue his own happiness by lurking on society’s boundaries with Du, who ethically resembles The Professor of \textit{Durante l’estate} in their shared dedication to marching to the beat of their own proverbial drummers.

In recruiting Du to his makeshift company, he refuses to call their venture together a trade, gruffly insisting that it is an art. Certainly, the distinction of working in an art would be significant after the rapid capitalist expansion following ‘the economic miracle’ of the 1950s. Machines and assembly lines replaced the singular creations of artisans. The Italian intellectual Adriano Olivetti observed during this transitional period

Joy in work, today denied to the greater number of workers in modern industry, will be felt again when the workman shall have understood that his efforts, his labor, his sacrifice – though it shall always remain sacrifice – is materially and spiritually tied to a noble and human entity which he is capable of perceiving, measuring, controlling. His laboring shall help strengthen that Community, alive, real, tangible, where his sons have life, bonds, interests. (2010: pg. 93)79

We have seen in I recuperanti, and most of the boom and post-boom films, the demands of corporations and the characters’ restricted access to work the lands around them prevents these people from having the experiences described by Olivetti or the satisfaction they may have gained in the past from working as craftsmen or the spiritual benefits of maintaining an intimate relationship between laborers and the natural world as depicted in E venne un uomo or L’albero degli zoccoli.

Du’s description of his work as an art has some validity to it, as in the initial scenes with his new partner when he shows off his natural metal detecting skills, promising that Gianni will possess these abilities one day. At first, Gianni doubts the old man’s abilities and his assurance of wealth when he tells the stories of the battleship and a former scavenger who now lives in a mansion in Brescia served by ‘beautiful maids’. But despite his own misgivings about this endeavor, and his fiancé’s, who fears for his safety, he feels desperate enough to give himself over to the risks of such employment. In the first occasion we see Gianni and Du working together after the young man has committed himself to trusting Du enough to dig when and where the old man says “get to work”, the uncovering of a large number of bullets and metal shells rewards him for his faith (image 67). Before he began digging, Du vocally recalled a battle fought in this space; his thorough knowledge of these events and where they occurred leads us to suspect that he was really a soldier here during WWI and may have demons he seeks to exorcize by digging up old war equipment. After demonstrating many of his other methods to Gianni, and uncovering bombs that still function, they find an abandoned building, explode the live ammunition, and carry the scraps down to a market full of other scavengers selling their findings. When he returns to the village, Elsa informs him of a new, local construction opportunity that she hopes he will take. However, he refuses to even consider this opportunity because he knows that it will take him years to move up the ladder and to save money. When she tells him she would prefer that he was in Australia working than exposing himself to the dangers he
faces excavating explosive material, Gianni walks away angrily telling her to pretend from now on that he is in Australia.

A few days pass before Gianni reports again to Du’s cabin, leaving the old man to question his commitment to their partnership. But Gianni has spent his savings from two years as a soldier buying a metal detector from an American Army surplus vendor, which Du immediately distrusts and mocks (image 68). The old man’s hesitancy to adapt to the intrusions made by cultures and worldviews unfamiliar to him, limit his ability to live and work with others that have integrated new ideas, working methods and technologies with more traditional approaches to work and life. When Gianni’s new device locates some useless metal scraps, Du does not hesitate to exclaim that he had predicted that the metal detector would be worthless.

Although Gianni eventually repairs his tool, and wins Du over to its benefits, another example of Du’s immersion in the past demonstrates itself in a
disturbing fashion. When Du returns to the cabin later he sports a soldier’s helmet among the day’s findings. As he enters speaking German and mimicking the actions of a soldier giving orders, Gianni attempts to fix the metal detector telling his colleague that he is going to put some modernity into his head (image 69). Du responds that modernity is baloney and then asks “Do you know what is modernity in perfection?” and stretching his hands out in front of him answers his own question “A polenta this big”. Although he seems playful when he marches outside and shouts out a soldier’s song out of tune, Du’s display of humor lacks the satirical edge that would suggest his imitation of a German officer contains a degree of contempt for the fascists, their cultivation of unquestioned tradition and their distrust of social diversity. Instead his joke falls poorly and only confirms that he lives in a world that no longer exists and cannot survive in the world that will arrive with ‘the boom’ or adapt to its exponential increase of cultural exchange in technologies and worldviews.
One day on their return home, after a particularly fruitful, if not extremely
dangerous, day of work when they have excavated a number of large bombs to
peddle at the scavenger’s market, they rest before a gorgeous valley. However,
certifying that the old man sees the world through a limited perspective, Du
immediately begins painting a much darker vision of the sight in front of them as
he recounts the battles fought here. He recites gruesome details and the
positions of the opposing sides in the battle, never looking at Gianni, as if these
images play before his eyes while he describes them. He then points downward
toward the field between the mountains and states “In that small valley there,
three thousand are dead. You see that grass over there, all green, down there.”
Gianni walks over and Du then asks him “Do you know why its so green? Its
because it has grown on human flesh.” He begins walking away saying “War is a
brutal beast. The world goes round and round, but it never stops.” Du and Gianni
walk past the camera as it pans over the valley without anyone in its frame. The
film’s music provides an ominous rising tone while the shot continues to take in the area, once the site of incredible devastation (image 70). Du’s failure to see the landscape for its present beauty, for the inspiration it can provide for future, attests to his shortsightedness and his captivity as a prisoner of historic trauma, likely wars, that barricades him from the rest of the world. Although Gianni himself was literally imprisoned during his recent service for the Italian army during WWII, his decision at the end of the film may compromise some of the structural freedom granted to Du, but it also exemplifies a choice to be a part of civilization.

In a subsequent sequence the two are spotted in town by another pair of scavengers. The scavengers have heard rumors that the prices of iron, lead, brass and copper are on the rise and advise Du and Gianni to keep their unsold items stashed until a truck arrives from Treviso that will pay the increased amount. In the meantime, they carefully dismantle one of the large bombs by
applying petroleum with a rooster’s feather to its head, which allows them to prevent the device from exploding. Du instructs Gianni precisely in this process, although he appears nervous himself when unscrewing the head from the body of the bomb.

Immediately following the disarming of the bomb, a cut takes us to the day when the truck from Treviso arrives at the scavenger’s market. The scavengers spot the regular buyer of these materials, ‘The Turk’, and they harass him for paying less than the traders that have just arrived. ‘The Turk’ defends himself by yelling back that he acts as a licensed dealer and that the men from Treviso deal illegally. Amidst the hustling occurring, a man rides into the field on motorbike shouting, “They’re dead, they’re dead.” When asked for details he replies that a bomb killed the Carlis, as well as everyone that was with them. The man rides off yelling that he is going to retrieve a doctor from town, although ‘The Turk’ is at his back instructing him not to tell the Carabinieri.

Accompanied by another scavenger, ‘The Turk’ heads up to the Carli’s cabin but on the way sees a worker pulling a cart carrying a severely injured man towards town. When questioned, besides the exploding bomb being a grenade, the injured man’s retelling of the incident sounds frighteningly similar to the dismantling of the bomb performed by Gianni and Du. When the doctor’s car pulls up beside the cart, ‘The Turk’ enters their car and rides the rest of the way to the Carli’s cabin. When they arrive, men lie all around the cabin, some blown literally into pieces, others dying. Gianni and Du do not make the journey to the Carli cabin, but like all of the other scavengers, the accident preoccupies them,
and after witnessing the aftermath of a disarming gone wrong, we see them discussing what happened. Gianni voices his doubts about their line of work to which Du replies that all jobs have their own risks. When the younger man asks his trainer why he continues to do the work, Du effectively provides Gianni with his permission to disband their newly formed company for a safer line of work. He responds that each person has his own reason, “Some for getting married, others to stay free. Each man has their own mind and you cannot control peoples' minds. There would be problems if everyone had the same mind.”

But another incident, perhaps just as gruesome, pushes Gianni towards finally deciding to abandon his short career as a scavenger. During an ordinary search one day they believe they have found the legendary battleship. Convinced they struck it rich, they descend into a group of lengthy caverns. At the end of the tunnels, however, the small candle Gianni carries reveals a group of dead soldiers who may have remained buried here for years. They exit the “tomb” with a portentous air, without carrying any of the guns or bullets they found with them. And in relative silence in contrast to the gleeful shouts echoing the caverns when they thought they were the discoverers of the prized relic of their profession.

In a quick scene in which Gianni does not utter a word, but only kisses Elsa from her windowsill as she greets him, his choice to leave Du is confirmed before we see him working alongside others at the construction site of a building. It is not long before we hear the brusque voice of Du shouting insults at Gianni and the other laborers accusing them of throwing themselves into slavery at the
feet of the rest of society. He urges them to keep on working, so that the next war will destroy their work and he can come and collect the bombs. The workers respond by calling him drunk and throwing slops of wet cement at him. Gianni intervenes, yelling at his co-workers to leave Du alone when the old man picks up a rock and hurls it at someone. Du chastises him for leaving their partnership behind without discussing it with him. When he declares that Gianni left him all alone and Gianni responds that he was always alone, Du has no response but can only complain because he does not know how to use the metal detector. Before walking off he repeats his slavery insult along with the added injury that a woman will be the death of him. Before the closing credits a final panning shot of a mountain range and a valley in the surrounding area closes the film.

As the film closes the feelings we have about Gianni’s choice are ambivalent. The building he constructs acts as a correlative for the new Italy built in the wake of the war and Gianni’s choice to be an active part in that new society (image 71). But simultaneously we feel troubled because Du’s accusations have a ring of truth to them, especially considering Olmi’s depictions of what the boom would do to Italians as they emigrated across the country, and sacrificed their familial lives in the interest of financial stability. *I recuperanti* was made and distributed during one of the most tumultuous periods of the twentieth century: the riots of Paris in 1968 and cold war anxieties that were brought to the forefront of every nation’s interest because of the Vietnam war. In many a war weary citizen’s eyes this could have signaled the
dawn of a third World War. However, the film seems to suggest that Gianni has learned a great deal about the cycles of history during the short time he has spent with Du digging up the past and these experiences have given him his fill of war’s leavings. At the conclusion he chooses a safer, more socially acceptable lifestyle even if it will not provide him with immediate wealth. Considering the unrest surrounding it, the film easily reads as an argument for seeking alternative routes, with the residue of the first two world wars fresh in many minds, to further armed struggles during an already murderous century. To have arrived at this understanding of the film should prepare one for reading of the rest of Olmi’s historical films, especially *L’albero degli zoccoli*, as being fully immersed in topical political issues, even though that was not how they were initially received.
Glancing back at the other winners of the *Palme D’or* in the 1970s, the victory of *L’albero degli zoccoli* (1978) (literally *The Tree of Clogs*, but its English release title is *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*) does not appear as much as an aberration as it might from the perspective of the present, acknowledging how Olmi’s films have been received since he won the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1978. From 1970-1979 Italian films tied titles from New Hollywood for the award of best film per country, four each, (either the *Palme D’or* or the *grand prix du Festival International du Film*). Today, *L’albero degli zoccoli* is one of three or four films that English language film scholars who have written about Olmi discuss, doubtlessly because it won one of the top prizes in the cinematic world.

Watching it today one must admit that its strong political feeling still reverberates during the film’s closing scenes even if we are distanced from some rather heated debates surrounding the film when it was first released. Jonathan Keates suggests that it “Seems that Olmi’s compatriots are more interested in his reluctance to toe certain approved political or ideological lines than in his merits as a filmmaker”; this statement could be applied to his status internationally as
This was certainly the case with the fervor that greeted this film from certain parties that were convinced that to make a political film about peasants’ class struggle, a consequent revolution must explode on screen or said filmmaker’s film is not worth its celluloid. A majority of the negative discussion surrounding *L’albero degli zoccoli* pitted Olmi’s work against Bertolucci’s nearly six-hour epic *1900* released two years previously in 1976. Bertolucci’s Marxist allegiance resolutely frames his film and its concerns; it never preaches didactically but makes its position clear. It also begins in turn of the century Italy but continues through WWII. The feud was never between Olmi and Bertolucci; instead Olmi’s most vociferous critic was novelist and cultural critic (and Marxist) Alberto Moravia. In a recent interview, Olmi still expressed strong feelings about this incident, stating, “If there is someone who is unprepared to talk about the world of farmers, it is the intellectuals of academia because they do not know what that world is.” (2008: pgs.31-32)

Perhaps it is the beauty and pervading peace of so much of the film that led Moravia and other detractors to ignore the significance of the closing moments, the injustice with which the Batisti family is treated through the film’s extended observations of their home and the livestock they have taken care of for years suddenly seized from them, with no proposed direction once they set out, homeless, on their cart. Leaving the resolution for this maltreatment to us, the film withdraws from conforming to the political leanings of the wealthy

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81 Olmi, Ermanno. Interview with Daniela Padoan. *Il sentimento della realtà.* Milan, Italy: Editrice San Raffaele, 2008. Print. Translated by me from the following: “Se c’è qualcuno non sufficientemente preparato per parlare del mondo contadino, sono gli intelletuali dell’ academia, perché non sanno cos’è quel mondo.”
educated class and intellectuals, but importantly leaves open the possibility that the socialist preacher heard during the festival and the revolutionaries we see carted off to jail when Maddalena (Lucia Pezzoli) and Stefano (Franco Pilegna) arrive in Milan for their honeymoon may carry the key that will unbind the chains that seal the peasant families to their landlord. However, as has previously been indicated, Olmi’s reimaginings of the past recall worlds that no longer exist and in doing so also seek to recreate behaviors and perspectives held within these realities. As we watch the families struggle to make ends meet, we also witness their closeness, community, the interknit devotion to their trades, and their religion that cannot be separated from one another without either’s drastic modification and reduction.

*L’albero degli zoccoli* is episodic, not exactly in the manner of Rossellini’s *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (1950), but in its telling of certain events from the lives of each of the four families that live in the *cascina* or farmhouse. The stories, instead of being presented and resolved immediately, unfold through the duration of the film, which begins and ends with the Batistis. Indeed, the story that most viewers will remember from the film revolves around the eponymous tree cut down by the father (Luigi Ornaghi) of the Batisti family to fashion a pair of wooden clogs for his son to walk to school after one of his former shoes splits in two (image 72). The film begins with the priest, Don Carlo, encouraging the family to send their son Minec (Omar Brignoli) to school although the family lacks many of the means to do so. Later in the film, the landlord notices the stump,
and he sends a bailiff to investigate. When Batisti is discovered to have chopped down part of the landlord’s property, the bailiff promptly evicts the family from their home and loads their livestock on a wagon to take back to the landlord. The story of the Widow Runk (Teresa Brescianini), her children, and her father Anselmo (Giuseppe Brignoli) has more discreet political connotations. Her husband has already died when the film commences, but she has six children to care for. Don Carlo offers to take two of her children to an orphanage to relieve her burden, but when her oldest son finds work, he offers to work night and day so the children can stay with them. Her father brings in a little money with a trick he has for cultivating tomatoes early by using chicken feces, but her only other source of income derives from a cow that falls sick. She has one of her sons fetch a veterinarian from town to treat the animal but he tells her she should kill it soon while she can still receive money for the meat. In a state of desperation, she dips an empty bottle in a nearby river, runs into a church to beg God for his
assistance and sanctify the water, and then while forcing the cow to drink it says
The Lord’s Prayer. Without any hint of sentimentalizing the moment with music or
close-ups, the cow rises later and the widow quietly kneels in front of a picture of
Christ nailed to the wall near the animal’s stall.

The incidents involving the Finard family seem to occur in the background of
the rest of the families but they also have political undertones, adapting
Christ’s parable of the talent, that provide possibly significant solutions to the
social problems the families face under the thumb of the landlord. Mister Finard
(Battista Trevaini) is a bit of a drunk and believing his son to be lazy, constantly
fights with the young boy, at times literally. During a local festival, after the rides
have shut down for the evening and the performers stop dancing Finard finds
himself listening to a politician speaking with a large audience of social progress
and the possibility of a democratic society only after the elimination of the
privileged class (image 73). However, he finds himself distracted from the
speaker by a coin he spots on the ground in the middle of the crowd. After
stealthily picking it up he runs back home and hides the coin in a hoof of his
horse by packing it under the animal’s foot with dirt. Periodically, Finard checks
that his treasure remains hidden, but one day he discovers that it has
disappeared and he flies into a rage, attacking the horse, who then turns on him.
The courtship and marriage of the young couple contains an important depiction
of societal struggle, which is alien to the young lovers after they get married.
Stefano’s courtship of Maddalena initiates one day when he follows her home
after work and requests her permission to greet her. Later he and other young
men stop by the cascina at night to join the families in their evening entertainment. The day of their marriage arrives and following their wedding they board a boat that carries them to Milan. Even from the riverside, fires spotted above the treetops tell them all is not well in Milan. Once there our impression of events is that the city is under siege by rebels and revolutionaries, but the newlyweds make their way through the streets to a convent where Sister Maria, Maddalena’s aunt, serves as a nun. The next morning the nun brings in an infant and asks the couple to adopt an abandoned boy whom they would receive money to care for. They return home and introduce their new addition to the rest of the families at the cascina.

Those already familiar with the director’s work will know of his affiliations with canonical Neo-Realism, but after the opening scene with Batisti and his wife, the film proudly affirms these associations, accompanied by the music of Bach, with a preamble that reads, “Acted in by farmers and people from the Bergamo
countryside. This is the way a Lombardian farmhouse should have appeared at the end of the last century. Four or five families of farmers would live here… The house, stalls, land, the trees, part of the animals and tools were owned by a landlord and to him were also owed two parts of a harvested crop.” This direct statement, followed by Batisti weighing the priest’s recommendation to send Minec to school, immediately frames the film to be understood with a political eye. By the conclusion, remembering that many of the actors themselves are farmers or ordinary citizens, we reconsider that the purpose of the film is not to indulge in nostalgia and the elegantly pastoral life humbly led by these everyday people, but to review the extra-cinematic world that we and these individuals face.

We cannot deny that L’albero degli zoccoli adorns the lives of the farmers through the tranquil selections of Bach that color the families emotions and spiritual ties to their work, the joy on the faces of the farmers during the evenings they sit listening to stories or singing, the laughter of the children, and the painterly composition of some of the images seeming as if they give life to the works of Van Gogh or Claude Lorrain (image 74). Before the film familiarizes us with any of the four principal stories that run their course through the film, we are immersed in this world by watching the farmers till dirt, harvest corn, the fascination the children have with a new born foal, and then the alarming beheading of a goose. After several gorgeous scenes, the abruptness of this brutality stuns us. Immediately following a shot of children jollily jumping in the hay, a cut takes us to the courtyard of the cascina, and a large goose runs
squawking its way across the screen. Children enter the shot, yelling, “Get her” until they corner her against a wall and one of the older boys hands the bird to Finard. The children follow Finard over to a log stump, reassuring one another and expressing their fear that the animal may bite. Finard lays the goose’s neck across the stump and with a swift blow, beheads the bird and then bleeds its neck into the dirt (image 75). When the farmer calls out for a container for the blood, a quick cut to a boy identifies the child’s distress at witnessing death and suggests that this way of life encompasses his comprehension of the cycles of life, death, and what it means to work and bring food to the table. However, this early sequence also prepares us to envision this world as less than ideal. Unless we oppose the use of animals for food, this incident does not present a moral problem. But the children’s playful relationships to the animal as they chase it, followed by its quick execution, intimates a struggle to these people’s existence a need to sacrifice and make choices based on surviving. Although the film
admires the farmers, their occupational devotion to their landlord and their
naiveté about the rest of the world marks their lives with injustice and from our
perspectives, missed opportunities. This sequence builds towards the choices
the farmers will have to make towards the encroaching modern world and as they
become more aware of what modernity would tell them are rights nature granted
them at birth.

After the quick tour through quotidian routines, Maddalena’s story takes
shape. Although we briefly glimpse her among others before the camera focuses
on her spinning a wheel of fabric in a factory, only around twenty minutes into the
film do we peer more closely into the events in any of the farmers’ lives. At the
factory, the workers sing through their labor until the whistle blows that tells them
they may leave. Mostly women work at this location, although on this particular
day she finds herself followed nervously by Stefano (image 76). In a tenderly
comic scene, he approaches her from behind until she can feel him breathing
down her neck on a stretch of a walkway home where they find themselves alone. Before he works up the courage to speak to her she smiles, anticipating his attempt at beginning a courtship. When she turns a corner he finally blurts out, “I wanted to know if I could say hello to you.” She only turns around slightly, so she can see him but not face him directly, and he expresses his wishes to greet her with good evening as well. While staring at the ground she replies, “If that’s all, there would be nothing wrong with it.” He asks her to say something else to him, and she looks up and wishes him good evening before they both turn around and walk in opposite directions.

One evening, Stefano and two other suitors join in the nightly gathering of the farmers at the cascina. As they enter the small stall where the families are gathered, Maddalena’s parents nod and wink at one another identifying which boy attempts to court their daughter. Cows huddle in the background while several women sew and the children listen to their parents talking. Batisti hears
music and then invites everyone to come outside and listen to a group of pipers they can hear playing at the landlord’s house. Their satisfied murmurings affirm that the musicians are performing as part of a Christmas tradition. Several close-ups show us the parents holding their children peacefully and Anselmo with his granddaughter who voices her amazement at the appearance of the moon. He cites a traditional proverb in response, “Haze around the moon, snow is coming soon.” When he tells his granddaughter that the saying means, “The earth needs snow.” The two young lovers steal careful glances at one another during this discussion that occurs, with an eye beyond the serenity that exudes from the surface of these moments, in an especially meaningful scene.

The political ramifications of this sequence do not declare themselves forcefully enough for us to hear them over our enchantment with the peacefulness with which the families gratefully listen to the music. But looking back on the scene in the courtyard from the scene that follows, there is a delineated sense of injustice in the farmers standing outside in the cold to hear music playing from the house of the man that essentially owns them. When Stefano walks home he hears a piece by Mozart played on the piano from the landlord’s house and he peeks beyond the gate to have a closer look. When the landlord sees him he requests to know who Stefano is, but the young man runs away. The landlord remains outside, peeping in himself through the window of his home, watching the young man at the piano and the well-dressed individuals attending his performance (image 77). Contrasting this situation with the audience at the courtyard of the cascina occurs naturally. And yet although we are disturbed by
the abundance held by the relative few seated warmly in the house while the many figures we care about have suffered the cold to be able to hear the music, our outrage is mitigated by the camera lingering on the landlord without any guiding commentary provided through dialogue or *mise en scène*.

The few moments we see the landlord he does not strike us as particularly loquacious or skilled in communication. We do not know what would have occurred if Stefano had identified himself to the landlord, but the boy’s lowly position gives us reason to presume that he was afraid of punishment for trespassing. These moments do not give us any reason to despise the landlord, or use him as a scapegoat for a society he did not create, but rather assist us in visualizing that what prevents the farmers from giving voice to their concerns is the unspoken rules of this economic system. And yet, undeterred by the difficulties posed by this system that reinforces their roles in society, the scene in the courtyard of the *cascina* illustrates that the cycles of life continue to move
forward in the spiritual and emotional aspects of their existence. The air of longing held between Stefano and Maddalena and Anselmo’s proverb renew the patterns of life that occur outside of the range of ideological forces.

Although the film does not privilege us with much of the courtship of the couple or their engagement, we imagine the formality within this routine from their initial greetings and a scene when Stefan asks for a kiss and is told effectively that those kinds of things happen when they will. When the marriage day arrives, the couples, their families, and the rest of the families of the cascina must rise early to marry in order for them to arrive in Milan before nightfall. They ride in horse driven carts to the church where the priest performs the wedding and blesses the young couple but suggests the journey they will make that day holds danger and warns them of people’s “strange ideas.” The newlyweds then board a boat to take them by river to Milan82 and take in the sights they can view from the banks and enjoy the first time they can spend together outside of their parents’ surveillance (image 78). Upon entering the city, the passengers spot a of smoke arising from Milan. Although many speculate that it may just be bonfire, the priest onboard worries that it may be demonstrators.

The film offers us a naïve perspective, that of the newlyweds and probably all of the other peasants, of the struggles that occur in the city, again refusing to bestow any political judgment on the events seen. Names are not mentioned for us to associate the rebels with thinkers, and neither side is displayed in a particularly villainous light for us to label either side as good or evil. However,

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82 The scenes in Milan were actually shot in Pavia, which had changed very little in the seventy-eight years since the setting of the film.
given the period and setting and viewing the situation from the present we can suppose the combatants viewed fighting soldiers are Marxist revolutionaries. As the scenes occur our invested interests lie with Stefano and Maddalena and we only hope they will arrive at the nunnery safely. And yet, this sequence piques our interest again at the end of the film because of the injustice handed out to Batisti.

The first impressions given of Milan, besides the smoke seen while on the boat, reflect its commercialism. Peddlers rush out to greet them as they alight on land, and subsequent shots display men selling their wares, as we hear prices negotiated, and shouts of sales from the soundtrack. At a crosswalk across an alley, a group of soldiers leading young men in chains stops the couple in their tracks (image 79). Maddalena and Stefano look on with confusion and curiosity as the soldiers and prisoners walk by until the road clears and they can pass through. Seconds later, walking on another street others tell them that the
soldiers have blocked the road ahead. Along their detour the commotion of the army racing by on horses and fearful exclamations of “They’re going to shoot” bring the newlyweds and other citizens under the shelter of a doorway until the dust settles.

They arrive safely at the nunnery of Maddalena’s aunt, Sister Maria and the nun greets them and ushers them into a dining room where they observe the orphan toddlers who reside there. Later that night as the sister shows her guests to their room, they walk through the children’s sleeping quarters, and the nun pronounces, “With the children in here the world is much more beautiful.” In the morning, the Sister enters with a child in arms. She encourages them to adopt the one-year-old boy, Giovanni Battista (John the Baptist), promising financial reimbursement from the boy’s family that the nunnery receives. Maddalena holds the child and tacitly agrees to bring Giovanni home with them.
The film elides their journey home, returning from the nunnery to the *cascina*, the families gathered around a table together with Don Carlo as he prepares to read with them the documents accompanying the new addition to the household. He affirms the pronouncements of the nun, establishing the financial relationship assumed that come with the child until Giovanni reaches the age of 15. But the final statement made by the priest, before a cut is made to the discovery by the landlord of the tree that Batisti chopped down, rings hollowly at the end of the film. The Father declares that even though Giovanni may originate from wealth, “…Now he is a peasant son. The most important thing is to love him first and he'll be happy anyways.” Like Stefano and Maddalena, the boy may grow up with the opportunity to love his family and a spouse that he adores as his parents feel towards one another. But as the film soon reveals, his livelihood will always remain in the hands of those in authority and his social class will remain powerless.

The adoption of the child does not respond to the politically motivated rebels in Milan, but acts as its own representation of bearing individual responsibility for the betterment of society. Martin Walsh writes in a well-reasoned piece analyzing Olmi’s works until 1971 that the emphasis in the director’s films is not on events, but on people, and their relationship to their environment: the dual themes of work and nature are recurrent motifs in his examination of man’s surrender to commercially orientated society, a surrender which has as its
concomitant the loss of the creative instinct. Intellectually, Olmi is in strong contrast to his neorealist predecessors. Not only is there a total lack of didactic political commitment, but his social commentary... focuses not on the evils of an unwieldy, stifling bureaucratic machinery, but upon the responsibility of each individual for his own life (1971: pg. 25).

Although Olmi's 1950s and 1960s works do contain a different political tone than the early Neo-Realist works of De Sica, Rossellini, Visconti and others, I think that this is partially due to the era in which they were released. But as Walsh asserts, Olmi's films do center on the choices of the individual in the face of their own existence. The choice of Maddalena and Stefano to adopt the child reflects a motivation to perform a political act within the sphere of his/her own influence. Other similar actions appear in *La circostanza*, *I fidanzati*, and *Un certo giorno*. But at the end of this film, there is an awareness that the actions one can accomplish individually are not enough to alter the relationship between the farmers and the landlord.

The story revolving around the Finard family probably occupies the least amount of screen time but consists of a consequential event that appertains to the Parable of the Talents and to the final scene of the film. The conflicts within the family do not appear until about twenty-five minutes into the film, although we do see the mother, father, and their sons among all the other families.

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beforehand. One day in the courtyard the father’s temper flares up when he accuses one of his boys of being lazy. Finard picks up a log and hurls it at the boy, chasing him outside of the walls of the cascina (image 80). One of his little girls yells up to turn her mother’s attention to the altercation. The wife responds, “They fight like cats and dogs. Everyday it is the same thing.” But the problem does not seem to be the fault of the boys. Because of the number of characters we follow in the film, we receive less time to gain much of an impression of each person’s individuality than we do in the rest of Olmi’s oeuvre. But in comparison with the rest of the farmers, Finard exhibits much more of a temperamental behavior than the rest of his co-workers and we can sense a general feeling of unhappiness from him which directs his actions at the festival.

The town festival celebrates a miracle that occurred after the historic rebellious action of local citizens against French soldiers 350 years previously. Don Carlo opens the festivities by recounting the events from his pulpit at the
church. Because three villagers threw stones at soldiers, a General Lutrec of the French forces had decided to burn down the village. The townspeople headed to the church to plead for supplication from the Madonna, that She might intervene on their behalf. The Madonna and Child painted on a wall of the church were said to have wept and when the general came, the image astonished him and he knelt in front of the painting and laid his sword and helmet down. The priest points to the remnants of this incident on an altar, stating that the armor and weapon remain there to this day to remind them of the dangers of the world (image 81).

The festival’s observance of this event bears mentioning because of its riotous beginnings. Although the miracle eventually contains the rebellion, the citizens that rise against representatives of an invading nation do not receive punishment in the story the priest tells. Mikhail Bahktin’s acclaimed book, *Rabelais and His World*, highlights the subversive elements of European popular culture that have roots in the festival that we see in this scene.
A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody – all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor. (1984: pg. 4)84

The festival takes place at the dawn of the twentieth century but still carries forward the anarchic spirit that characterized the literature of Rabelais and the carnival festival of his own era. The children ride on a carousel, puppeteers, comic mimes and musicians perform shows, ritualistic contests take place, games are played, and the adult peasants get smashingly drunk. The multi-day festival allows attendees to contort order and challenge, within a certain parameter, the roles society has designated to them.

One evening during the festival after watching a dancing mime, Finard wanders into a crowd surrounding a political speaker on a raised platform. We hear the politician at first distantly, corresponding to Finard’s separation from him.

Unfortunately social order always lags behind the needs of life. Only with a common possession of knowledge and progress can we finally speak of the new conquests of

civilization. When justice and respect for every citizen’s rights becomes an everyday occurrence, a rule of life accepted and practiced by everyone, when there are no longer a privileged few while there are others who lack, only then can we say we’ve built a democratic society.

Unfortunately social progress moves forward slowly, blocked by those with fear, but above all those who call for it as a human right have not supported it with enough courage. Many remain in the background while only a few bravely move forward.

Initially, Finard draws himself closer to the rabble-rouser and listens attentively. These words do not seem to elicit any collective feeling from the large crowd that has gathered to hear this speech. Those present cannot be said to be indifferent, because their gazes remain fixed on the speaker; that is, except for Finard who spots a piece of money in the dirt.

When he sees the coin, his face takes on an appearance of wonder that everyone surrounding him has failed to notice the money. His eyes dash between the speaker and the ground until he slyly walks over and places a foot on the coin while feinting to continue to give heed to the speech. Keeping his eyes locked on the speaker, he slowly bends down, removes his foot and places the coin in his hand. Having ascertained that is indeed what he thought it was, he cannot contain a gleeful laugh from bursting forth as he walks away from the crowd. Once out of sight, though not out of hearing distance of the speaker’s
appeal, he pulls up his cloak and races home. Once at the *cascina* he attempts
to sneak by a dog but when it barks he retreats into the stall of his horse. He
calms the animal down, picks up its hoof, and after removing dirt and straw,
places the coin in the hole he has dug and packs his treasure with dirt (image
82).

A day arrives, however, when during a periodical check to reassure
himself that his money has stayed hidden and, of course, it has vanished. He
digs through the horse’s foot, panicked. He yells swears, and spits at the animal
while he hits it, accusing it of stealing from him. The horse reacts by chasing its
master with a small wagon attached to its back. Finard escapes into a stall and
the horse gives chase, striving to force its way through the door but the wagon’s

![Image 82](image82.jpg)

size prevents him from having a stomp at his master. The other farmers race to
the scene and pull the horse away from its target.
Alberto Moravia lifted the confrontation from the sequence described above to lambast Olmi’s film. His article entitled “Ora basta, disse il cavallo” (Enough now, says the horse) accuses the film of containing humble heroes unique to Italian literature, citing such authors as Verga, Goldoni and Manzoni as evidence. He then continues to offer his view of the film as reinforced by what he sees an Olmi’s Catholic ideology. In his description of Finard’s story he ignores all evidence of the political connotations of the event, including where and how the money was found, the events occurring in Milan during the honeymoon of Stefano and Maddalena, and the harsh criticism of the economic system in the film’s closing moments. “The ideology of L’albero degli zoccoli is manzonian, that is it looks at farming culture as a model, with admiration and approval, attempting to adopt its vision of the world.” (1978: pg. 154-155) This is a complete misreading of the film and also of Manzoni. Yes, Manzoni’s Bethrothed does have a distinctly Catholic worldview, but this perspective indicts those in power, including those in prominent leadership positions in the church such as the Nun of Monza. Olmi does look at the farmers with admiration and does not illustrate the Catholic faith in negative tones (although Don Carlo is mostly powerless to help the peasants in their struggles), but he does not do any of this with nostalgia nor to pine for a lifestyle that leaves the workers powerless in the face of their landlord’s temperament. Indeed, if we read Finard’s loss of his treasured coin as an allusion to the New Testament’s parable of the talents, from which both the

English and Italian word suggesting a developed skill originates, then Finard fails to put his fiery temper to good use for the benefit of those in his class. And although the farmers way of life may have a particular beauty that appeals to us from the manner in which their labor, family, and spiritual beliefs coalesce in the core of their home in the cascina, the film does not suppress the fact that these people struggle daily to make ends meet.

Until the closing scene, the Widow Runk encounters the most arduous trials just to feed her many children and keep a shelter over their head. And even though her father and son both assist her efforts, the family barely appears to subsist. When a mentally handicapped wanderer, Gioppa, ambles through the cascina, she admonishes her children not to laugh because “Poor souls like that who have nothing are closer to God.” But initially the widow’s own struggles do not attest to this hopeful sentiment. When Don Carlo stops by and finds her washing clothes in the rain by a creek, he is powerless to do anything to help her with her financial needs beyond suggesting that she send the two youngest children to an orphanage (image 83).
That evening, when her eldest child arrives home from work, she discusses the priest’s proposition with him while the rest of the family eats their dinner in front of the fire. Anselmo regales the children with a story of how sparks flying from fires are actually souls who have escaped from hell looking for souls. One of his granddaughters interjects that good people frighten devils and the grandfather asks them if they say their prayers. When they reply affirmatively, he hits the burning wood with a rod to prove to his grandchildren that they scare the fiery devils with their goodness (image 84). But the somber discussion that takes place on the other side of the table counters the light mood and playfulness of Anselmo’s fable. When he hears of Don Carlo’s suggestion, the boy is dismayed, but he spouts off other possibilities that would allow them to keep the two youngest children, finally resolving that he will work day and night and do whatever he can to keep his brother and sister with them. There is no possibility of magical realism here or a deus ex machina device that materializes to solve
the burdensome financial concerns of the Runk family. The myth spun by Anselmo mesmerizes the children and bolsters their spiritual connection to their work and the world that surrounds them, but the benevolence, faith, and goodwill of these people will not in themselves put food on the table.

Likewise, the film does not provide any visible reasons to support that the healing of the Widow Runk’s cow is a verifiable miracle. The widow definitely understands the event as a miracle, and the depiction of the event also grants us that possibility if we choose to read the scene that way, but in no way is this event displayed supernaturally. The cow stops eating and lackadaisically lies in her stall, prompting the Widow to call upon a veterinarian. He advises her to butcher the animal immediately and sell the beef while it is still good. Not willing to give up, the widow washes out a wine bottle, and walks hurriedly to the church, pleading to God for his help and detailing the dire circumstances she finds herself in since her husband has died. A final prayer she begins at the church carries over through a sound bridge into a subsequent shot while she dips the bottle into a creek, begging God to bless the water with the ability to heal and demanding desperately that He bless her in this situation. Determined she returns to the cow’s stall, grabs its horn to tilt its head back, jams the bottle into its mouth, and repeats the Lord’s Prayer. A morning arrives when one of the daughters jolts out to the widow washing clothes at the creek to tell her that the cow stands. When the widow sees the cow on its feet with her own eyes she walks over to a picture of the Madonna and Child and kneels before it, offering her gratitude. But the sequence never confirms the Widow’s belief that the act
was a miracle through music, further discussion of the incident, nor any glowing halos or vaselined lenses. Whether this incident can be attributed to an act of God or not, no extraordinary intervention interferes with the landlord’s punishment for the unapproved acquisition of lumber from one of his trees in Batisti’s story.

At the film’s opening, in the church, Batisti openly contests Don Carlo’s instructions to send Minec to school because he and his wife are almost ready to welcome another child into their family and Minec could assist in completing tasks around the cascina. The pastor suggests that the family let providence take care of whatever worries he may hold about making ends meet and that the boy will provide for his family when he has completed his education.

Batisti and his wife decide to make the sacrifice to send their son to school despite their insecure financial situation. The night before his first day of school, after his father washes him in a small bucket, Minec apprehensively lies awake in bed. Sharing a room with his parents, his mother catches the boy with his eyes open and admonishes him to say his prayers so that God will lighten his mind. It is interesting to note that in this instance and elsewhere in the film the farmers never call upon God to change nature, but only ask Him to provide a blessing of benefit to one’s skills or of benefit to health. Their theology implies that they do not expect God to do things for them that they can do for themselves, and this perspective reiterates itself at the end of the film when Don Carlo’s presence is lacking and only the Widow Runk offers a prayer for the welfare of the dishonored family.
To arrive at school, the boy walks a few miles each day by himself in clothes inadequate for the harsh cold weather of a northern Italy winter. When he returns home his parents remove his wet clothes and set him by the fire as he eats his meager dinner (image 85). Minec amazes his parents with what he tells them of what he learns, his descriptions of microscopic entities sounding like magic. Although they seem pleased with their child’s education, Batisti remains anxious, especially after his wife gives birth.

When Minec’s shoe splits in half at school, he tries to fix it by himself at first by unfastening the rope he uses as a belt and tying it around his shoe to hold it together. His temporary solution quickly falls apart when he makes his way to the muddy road and he decides to remove his sock and shoe and walk home with one foot bare. This occurs on the day Minec’s new brother is born and when the boy returns home his father instructs him not to say anything to his mother.
about the broken clog, giving us reason to suspect that Batisti already has resolved to cut down one of his landlord’s trees.

Night falls and Batisti puts on his cloak, with hatchet concealed, and tells his two oldest boys that he needs to go out for a moment before he heads to the side of the creek to obtain lumber underhandedly. After selecting the tree he will fell, he starts chopping off unneeded limbs and branches from the upper half, consistently looking around to ensure he remains unseen. After the wood breaks and falls, he gathers enough to craft a new shoe for his son, not more than three feet in length, stows it under his cloak, covers the tree stump in dirt and leans several branches against it, perhaps to make it less obvious that someone has cut down a tree or maybe even that it has naturally fallen.

He returns home and as his wife says the nightly prayers with the children before they go to sleep, Batisti repeats the prayers nervously pacing around the room and then clandestinely looks out the window to ascertain if anyone followed him. Still able to hear his wife’s calling segment of the prayer when he begins to head down the ladder from their sleeping quarters and into the living room, he continues to recite the responding side of the prayer while he cuts the wood for Minec’s shoe (image 86). Clearly, the reason he has gathered the wood secretly and without consulting with his wife is only because he fears the punishment of his landlord and not because he feels any paradox between this action and his understanding of God’s commandments. This conflict regarding the rights to nature’s bounty reminds those of us viewing this sequence after The Gleaners and I (2000) of Agnès Varda’s legal consultations in the fields. As in that film, the
morality of landlords who discard or do not use the natural resources they own is called into question in this situation. Batisti certainly knows what will occur if the landlord discovers the felled tree, but he is not breaking the spirit of any laws that he truly holds sacred.

Immediately prior to the cut to the scene when the landlord finds the stump of Batisti’s tree, Don Carlo has barely finished reading the documents that accompanied Maddalena and Stefano’s adopted son. One of the wives suggests the baby may have originated from wealth. The priest states that this does not matter because “From now on, he’s a peasant’s son. The first thing is to love him and he’ll be happy anyways.” When he concludes speaking, only one shot appears, of the boy in Maddalena’s arms, before we see the landlord riding in his carriage on his way to the tree stump. The sequencing of the fatal discovery after Don Carlo’s optimistic blessing on the child indicates that in this instance love does not suffice in securing the happiness of the families of the cascina.
The landlord does not even exit from his carriage when he suspects that someone has chopped down a tree on his property without his consent. Instead, he sends the bailiff to investigate the scene who confronts one of Finard’s sons that works nearby. The boy reports that he knows nothing of the tree when pressed for an answer but the tone of the bailiff implies that he will find his criminal. Our own observation of the punishment that the landlord and the bailiff mete out comes from the perspective of the other families who first discuss the implications of the incident with the tree and then witness the swift eviction of the Batistì family.

After Anselmo returns home from selling his tomatoes in the village with one of his granddaughters a somber air permeates the widow Runk’s home until he feels compelled to ask what happened. The widow tells her father of the eviction, that the family must leave by morning with all of their possessions. Fear and a deep grief tinge their conversation about the supposed crime, leading to Anselmo’s acknowledgement that this means, “Taking the bread away from those people.” When the hooves of the bailiff’s horse are heard, a cut is made to the Finard home that is filled with the same sense of unease as the widow’s. Neither family exits their homes, but observe the events from their windows and doorways and the film cuts back and forth between establishing and displaying both homes’ points-of-view (image 87). They watch as the officer loads the landlord’s animals that Batisti has cared for onto and behind the cart, Finard’s wife lamenting “Those poor people. They have nothing left now.” When Batisti loads the few items he does have, we also view the disgraced farmer from the
home of Maddalena and Stefano. The families do not even bid goodbye to those departing, seemingly afraid and at a complete loss as to the appropriate course of action.

Any understanding that argues the film does not demand action has been a severe misreading of this work. As the family leaves in tears with no stated direction, shame falls on the other families for their lack of action and for simply watching people they have worked with for years turned out of their homes for nothing. By not doing anything they contradict the ethical principles of their background and existence as farmers who rely on one another for support in all aspects of their lives. Their lives simply cannot go forward in the manner that allows their spiritual and work lives to integrate if they do nothing.

However, the film does not provide a ready answer for what their collective response should be. The ways hegemony is maintained is displayed thoroughly. The semi-religious festival that allows the speaker during the festival and the
rebels in Milan suggest revolution as a possibility but the limited resources of the farmers and their lack of training disenchants us with doubts about the success of simply grabbing torch and pitchfork. Education offers another solution through Minec but it is unlikely the boy will be able to complete his education now that the family is homeless. Indeed, no answer to the severe faults in this particular form of capitalism (or our contemporary form of these same economic and class systems that create similar moral problems), provide immediate changes. At this point, the film invites intense scrutiny and thought, but decidedly it demands thorough and lasting action.

... The thorough misreading and neglect of the evidence I have outlined here for the political nature of L’albero degli zoccoli is just one example, among the many others that I have cited throughout these chapters, of the need for more scholarly attention devoted to the study of one of Italy’s greatest filmmakers. For whatever reason English language film scholars have disregarded Olmi. Thanks to the inclusion of two of his films in The Criterion Collection and occasional retrospectives, his work continues to be discovered by courageous viewers looking to expand their knowledge of post-canonical Neo-Realist cinema beyond those filmmakers who have already received a great deal of international attention. Understanding these films in relationship with one another, the history films with the boom and post-boom works, develops each film’s profundity and significance. Those who had experiences similar to mine own certainly desire to
discern what renders Olmi’s cinema remarkable in its capability to expand the humanistic vision of those who participate with his works.
REFERENCES


