

Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism

MILlicENT MARCUS

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9 Olmi's *Il posto*: Discrediting the economic miracle

BECAUSE *Il posto* MEETS all the external requirements of neorealism—nonprofessional cast, location shooting, contemporary subject matter, minimal storyline, social criticism, concern for the common people—and because it avoids the stylistic flamboyance of the great 1950s' auteurs, the film has been hailed as a throwback to early neorealism, a return to the "humble, quotidian reality that for at least fifteen years has been at the root of the vitality of Italian cinema."¹ Ermanno Olmi, with his training as a documentarist and his refusal to work in a commercial film industry wedded to "sword and sandal" films and to sequels of the pseudo-anthropological *Mondo cane* (1962), seems to be the ideal standard-bearer for the neorealist revival.² In his sense of the filmmaker's public mission, Olmi demonstrates that he is indeed the moral, as well as the technical heir of 1940s neorealism. "Any reality portrayed on the screen demands that the spectator take responsibility for it," he told Charles Thomas Samuels. "Most films subvert culture because they

¹Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano*, pp. 263–64. For other observations on Olmi's return to the precepts of the early neorealists, see Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, p. 99; Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema*, pp. 201–204; Gerald Masi, *A Short History of the Movies* (New York and Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 360; Arnes, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 201; and *Springtime*, ed. Overbey, p. 30.

²Olmi made a series of about thirty "industrial documentaries" from 1953 to 1961 for the Edisonvolta electrical company of Milan. For details, see Lino Micciché, *Il cinema italiano degli anni '60* (Venice, Marsilio, 1975), p. 192. On his refusal to comply with the commercial film industry, see Gideon Bachmann, "Ermanno Olmi: The New Italian Films," *The Nation*, 25 May 1964, 541.

encourage the evasion of responsibility. In my view, society must be made up of responsible men, for those who do not take responsibility for their own lives are ripe to be led by a dictator."³ Though less programmatic than the neorealists' *impegno* with its encouragement to direct reformatory action, Olmi's concept of artistic responsibility shares with it the same ethical impulse, which resides at the core of all *engagé* art.⁴

Yet his surface adherence to neorealist technique and his moral affinities with neorealist thought should not blind us to the important differences that separate Olmi from his predecessors and make *Il posto* no throwback at all, but a film very much of its time. When critics speak of him as a latter-day De Sica in his poetic rendering of the ordinary, they imply that Olmi took up where the earlier filmmaker left off with *Umberto D*, carrying forward the unfinished experiment of early 1950s neorealism.⁵ Such an approach to Olmi's stylistic ancestry is fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is its dismissal of the very reasons for the movement's decline after 1952. If Olmi indeed takes up where De Sica leaves off, how does he manage to avoid the problems of the filmmakers of the mid-1950s who sought to do just that, with the advantage of greater chronological proximity

³See Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, p. 104.

⁴Olmi is emphatic about the imperative to a cinema that forces its viewers to accept moral responsibility for their lives. See his interview with Aldo Tassone in *Parla il cinema italiano*, II, 206-207, 210-11, and 213. Olmi refuses, however, to advocate direct reformatory action since he argues that the human predicament is not amenable to an easy political cure. See the same volume, p. 202.

⁵See Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema*, p. 201; Ferrara, "Neorealism: Today," in *Springtime* ed. Overbey, pp. 222-23. Micieli sees two traditions at work in post-neorealist cinema: the major, Viscontian postwar mode, and the minor one practiced by Castellani and De Sica. See *Il cinema italiano degli anni '60*, p. 192. On the priority of De Sica's influence over that of Rossellini or Visconti on Olmi's brand of neorealism, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 173. Brunetta, however, finds Rossellini the greater influence. See his *Storia*, p. 652.

to the early neorealists and without the distracting examples of the preeminent fifties auteurs to disrupt the continuity of neorealist influence? In other words, how did Olmi escape the twin traps of rosy realism, on the one hand, and "miscreantism"—that wallowing in Roman slums in squalor and despair that had mistaken the outward trappings of neorealism for its inner substance—on the other?⁶ Indeed, what kept him from making the kind of mistake that De Sica and Zavattini made with *Il tetto*, their own well-meaning, if tired attempt to continue in the spirit of *Umberto D*? Furthermore, if neorealism first arose in response to a concrete set of historical circumstances, how could the ten years of political and economic changes which separate *Umberto D* from *Il posto* not bring with it the need for aesthetic changes of a corresponding order?

A plot summary reveals the simplicity, even the banality, of subject matter which has prompted critics to see in Olmi the successor to neorealist De Sica. *Il posto* tells the story of Domenico Cantoni, a young man from a working-class family in the small town of Meda, who applies for a white-collar job in a large Milanese corporation. After a long but not very arduous day of examinations in which Domenico meets Antonietta, another candidate for employment, he is awarded a position in the firm. His good luck is compounded by the discovery that Antonietta, too, has been hired. Domenico's hopes are doubly dashed, however, when he is assigned to a department remote from hers, and is temporarily denied the white-collar position of his dreams for an interim job as errand boy. The film teaches its climax at the company-sponsored New Year's Eve party which Domenico attends in the

⁶Films exemplifying this trend include Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961), *Mamma Roma* (1962), and Paolo Heusch's and Brunello Rondi's *Una vita violenta* (1962). On miscreantism, see Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema*, p. 195; and Raymonde Borde and André Bouissay, "Le miscreantisme romain," in *Le nouveau cinéma italien* (Lyon: Serdoc, 1963), pp. 18-33.

vain hope of meeting Antonietta. The next day, he is indeed promoted to a clerical post upon the death of a fellow employee.

To take the full measure of the distance separating *Il posto* from early neorealism, let us return to *Bicycle Thief*, since Olmi seems to be bringing some of De Sica's assumptions in that earlier film to their logical conclusions for the Italy of 1961. It is as if we were to visit the Ricci household thirteen years after the events of *Bicycle Thief* to find Antonio not only comfortably employed, but the father of two upwardly mobile sons. In *Il posto*, Olmi offers a visual example of intergenerational mobility as Domenico and his father leave for work one morning, clad in the outfits appropriate to their newly divergent class affiliations. While Domenico wears the fancy new trenchcoat which amounts to a kind of trademark of white-collar elegance (several other applicants for the job were similarly dressed), his father wears the short jacket and beret of the working classes. In an analogous scene from *Bicycle Thief*, both father and son leave for work arrayed in blue-collar attire, since Antonio's job as a poster-hanger represents the pinnacle of his family's class aspirations. Indeed, if Domenico is Bruno grown up, then *Il posto* portrays a world inconceivable to Antonio in 1948, a world in which the job is not just a means of putting bread on the table, but a way of moving up the social scale, of wearing fancy new trenchcoats instead of short jackets and berets. Nor does Domenico's white-collar status represent the height of his family's social ambitions, since his younger brother Franco is being groomed for the even better position to which further schooling will entitle him, at his older brother's expense. When questioned by the boss about why he quit school to come to work, Domenico explains "I have a little brother . . ." suggesting that it is Franco who will take the family's potential for social mobility to its highest realization.

But *Il posto* is far from a celebration of Antonio Ricci's

dream for job security and social status as De Sica portrays it in *Bicycle Thief*. When Domenico finally lands the coveted office position and his eyes open wide in disbelief as the sounds of the mimeograph machine overwhelm the soundtrack, he has belatedly come to realize what Olmi has been intimating all along, that this secure job so vaunted by his parents is simply a way of marking time—the interval between the bells for lunch and for dismissal, or in Domenico's case, the interval between adolescence and retirement.⁷ In the phrase "un posto sicuro per tutta la vita" ("a secure position for an entire lifetime") the first part of the proposition negates the second, for the stasis implied by job security is no life at all, but a kind of suspended animation which finds its fitting fulfillment in death. Nothing better demonstrates this criticism than the office itself, whose absence of specified function (we never know what the company produces and what these particular office workers do) makes it an abstract emblem of the bureaucratic life sentence to which Domenico is condemned at the end of the film. Until then, Domenico had been consigned to a temporary position as an errand boy, stationed outside the office proper, waiting for a vacancy to arise within its more prestigious ranks. When the opening occurs, what should be a triumphant moment for Domenico, and for the film, becomes a devastating one, as it brings the awful revelation that death is the dynamizing force of the bureaucracy. Domenico's opportunity comes not because someone has been promoted into a higher department (this apparently is never the case) but because someone has died, and since the order of desks represents the hierarchy of positions within the office, there is a terrific scuffle when everyone advances one place as soon as the dead man's "debris" is removed. Neither does promotion reward merit, nor does it entail new powers and duties—it simply means a better lamp and a desk

⁷Mast notes the grim wit of the human "duplication" that the final image of the mimeograph machine betokens. See *A Short History*, p. 360.

closer to the front.⁸ But Olmi puts added bite into this anti-bureaucratic satire by positioning the dead man's desk at the head of the office—the place to which all aspire—in the bitter suggestion that death is the final promotion and the closest biological equivalent to the condition of life in the bureaucracy. Even though the dead man had been a practicing novelist in his spare time, implying a secret life far more vivid and gratifying than that of the workplace, his creative efforts are doomed to suffer the same fate as his office belongings, when the contents of his desk, including Chapter 19 of the novel in progress, are heaped above some file cabinet to be forgotten. Another character for whom the office is the antechamber to death is the pensioner who, after three months of retirement, still comes into work every day, only to nap until minutes before the bell so that he can pride himself on being the first to exit for lunch.

In its antibureaucratic satire, *Il posto* goes beyond a specific institution in a specific social context and finally beyond bureaucracy itself to consider the universal human longing for security and status within a preordained hierarchical structure. Throughout the film, such a need is manifest at the lowest as well as the highest levels of bureaucratic operations. Indeed, the first to demonstrate the differential responses befitting the various gradients of the hierarchy is the doorman, who greets the boss with obsequious bowings and scrapings, answers Domenico in an abrupt and perfunctory way, and dismisses with a shrug of the shoulders the pauper who mistakes the office building for the headquarters of the municipal welfare authorities. In the next sequence, a middle-aged errand "boy" vents his outrage at being asked to do something that he considers beneath his professional dignity. "I may be a page, but I'm not a servant," he explains to his colleague, insisting that his duties do not include getting snacks for the higher-ups. The same two errand boys reappear later

⁸ On the meaning of the order of desks in the political context of the office, see Olmi's explanation in Tassone, *Parla il cinema*, II, pp. 202–203.

in the film, just as Domenico is about to receive his job placement, and how they are busy discussing the contents of their sandwiches. Soon after the second introduction to the idle, self-important population of errand boys, we learn that Domenico is temporarily assigned to their ranks, dashing his white-collar hopes for the time, replacing his trenchcoat with the pseudo-military array of the custodial staff. To learn the errand boy's trade, Domenico is apprenticed to Sartori, who enjoys having a captive audience for his platitudinous humor ("my wife kisses me once a month—on payday," "trust anyone—with two heads") and a co-conspirator in his refusal to work ("let the bell ring, when they're tired of ringing it, they'll stop," "let them pick up the mail themselves"). Of all Domenico's superiors, Sartori is the most enviable because the most free, defying bells and summonses, and enjoying the liberty to move about the corridors while his higher-ups are pinioned to their ill-lit desks. The closer to the top of the hierarchy we get, the less happy and the less human the characters become, until we arrive at the baronial boss of the entire technical department who never once deigns to look at Domenico during the interview that will launch his career in the firm. Though this imposing figure is the highest embodiment of bureaucratic authority we see in the film, he is himself only one link in a chain of command that extends into some indefinite bureaucratic "beyond."

Such is the power and mystery of this transcendent governing force that Olmi equates it with the ordering principle of his narration, so that it is seen as responsible for generating the sentimental plot of the film and for blocking its successful resolution. Domenico meets Antonietta because they are both taking the entrance exam for the job and they meet again because they are both hired. When Antonietta whispers to Domenico "we are accepted . . . all those others . . ." looking around at the sadly reduced numbers in the same room that had been so crowded on the day of the exam, the suggestion is that the company's winnowing out process helps

to further the protagonist's romantic ambitions as well as his vocational ones. But by assigning Antonietta to a department remote from Domenico's and even worse, by failing to synchronize their schedules, the same invisible bureaucratic intelligence that ordained the couple's meeting presents obstacles to those daily encounters that so nourish the course of affection. Domenico eats one hour before Antonietta, and exits from the plant fifteen minutes after she does so that no sooner is the romantic plot set in motion by the *deus ex machina* of the bureaucracy than it is blocked by the same seemingly superhuman force. When Antonietta fails to appear in the company cafeteria for lunch, a toothless old woman takes an interest in the obviously disappointed Domenico and asks the name and department of his beloved. "Second shift," she concludes, as if giving voice to one of the absolute consequences of natural law. Again, when Domenico awaits Antonietta after work and is met instead by the same old crone who had betried him at lunch, it is as if the genius of bureaucracy were playing a cruel trick on him, turning the blooming young object of his affections into her antitype in this paragon of experience and physical decay.

One of the anomalies of satire, as Alvin Kernan observes, is its simultaneous pretension to realism and its need to exaggerate, or even distort its subject matter in order to unmask vice.⁹ Without the realistic elements, the relationship between satire and its target in the external social order would be considerably weakened, yet without exaggeration, the representation would lose its polemic force. By giving his film the neorealist look, Olmi satisfies the former requirement of the genre, while by stylizing and "storifying" his narration, he is able to realize his satiric assault on the bureaucracy. Upon closer examination, even the film's visual surface exhibits a tension between the straightforward, unobtrusive technique appropriate to realism, and the distorted, exaggerated

⁹ See Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), p. 23.

ated style required by satire. Three times, for example, Domenico is artificially diminished by a camera which shoots him walking down halls of exaggerated length or facing a boss of exaggerated bulk, in a Kafkaesque commentary on the bureaucracy he is about to join.¹⁰ An aerial shot gives a providential view of the room where the exam takes place, while a low-angle shot idealizes Domenico and Antonietta against the monumental Milanese skyline. Most obtrusive is a *trompe l'oeil* shot of Domenico admiring his errand-boy uniform in what turns out to be a mirror reflection, once the camera backtracks to reveal its trick point of view.

On a narrative level, Olmi posits a similar tension between the rival impulses at the core of the satiric mode. Like a documentary, *Il posto* begins with no credits to distract us from its illusion of reality, showing us instead a boy asleep on a bed in the kitchen of a working-class tenement. In the first words of the film, Domenico's father and mother reveal the conflict between the demands of realism, on the one hand, and those of contrived story on the other. As the father leaves for work, his wife asks him to get some oil, "the usual kind," as if this were any morning in the life of the Cantoni family and we were simply eavesdropping on their daily routine. When Domenico's mother says "the usual kind," she is alluding to the habits and predilections that constitute family life and in so doing, conjures up an entire past, present, and future of small household events which conform to Zavattini's aesthetic of the ordinary.¹¹ But Domenico's father makes a statement which marks this morning as far from "the usual" and sets the machinery of dramatic plotting in motion. "Make sure he does his best today," he says to his wife, referring to Domenico's candidacy for the job. Though Olmi understates

¹⁰ The Kafka analogy is one of the commonplace of *Il posto* criticism. See Borde and Bouissay, *Le nouveau cinéma italien*, p. 47, and Tassone, *Parla il cinema*, II, p. 202.

¹¹ On Olmi's preference for "those moments in which nothing happens" and his avoidance of "exceptional moments," see Tassone, *Parla il cinema*, II, p. 213.

the dramatic structure of the film by relegating the two most consequential events—Domenico's discovery that he has landed the job, and the death of his colleague—to behind-the-scenes, the film is nonetheless highly "storified," filled with vignettes that imply a wealth of tangential narrations. Among the hordes of job applicants, for example, Olmi manages to single out three characters so vivid that we cannot help fleshing-out in our imaginations the miniature stories suggested by each one. The know-it-all who whispers significantly "psychotechnical exam," as if his mere knowledge of the term made him privy to all kinds of bureaucratic secrets, the mamma's boy whose fur-coated parent squires him through the exam boasting of family "connections," and the older man who insists with exaggerated pride that his name be spelled correctly though he cannot perform the simplest mathematical operations, are all so dramatically suggestive that we cannot resist supplying them with storylines of their own.

Yet even more suggestive are the character sketches of Domenico's potential colleagues whose idiosyncracies in the office are either explained or complemented by brief narrative forays into their personal lives. It is here that we learn of the novelist's private labors, of Don Luigi's probable ties with the Mafia, of Carletto's operatic exertions at the old folks' home, of the single mother's trials at the hands of her delinquent son, and of the vain man's shame at having his hair cut at home. 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.¹² Thus the stylistic tension inherent in satire between realism on the one hand and contrived dramatic effects on the other finds its thematic

¹² On the juxtaposition of these vivid personal vignettes and the drab, routinized workplace, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 174.

equivalent in the tension between the bureaucracy and its implacably human, story-making constituents. It is in the critically acclaimed party sequence that this tension comes to a head, as the guests manage to have a boisterous good time despite the gimmickry and mechanization of the company sponsors.¹³ Even though the master of ceremonies admonishes everyone "to have fun" just as the boss might order them to get to work on any other day, and even though the P.A. announces that the front office will allow husbands and fiancés to kiss their partners on the mouth at the stroke of midnight, the revelers still manage to reach a pitch of hilarity and abandon that quite defies the bureaucracy's efforts at control. The party becomes a breeding ground for stories—though not for the particular story of love that Domenico had in mind. Instead, he gets caught in the cross fire of adulterous glances between a self-styled vamp and the escort of a homely young woman. The jilted partner rather good-naturedly takes charge of Domenico and initiates him into the joys of the dance. But when it seems that the human element has finally triumphed over the bureaucracy as the party reaches its height, Olmi's editing suggests otherwise. The cut from the New Year's Eve revelry to the tomblike office—doubly tomblike now that the novelist has died—reveals the victory of bureaucracy and order over the richness and anarchy of human foibles. Appropriately, the film's own narration comes to an end as Domenico is absorbed into the world of the office, abdicating his freedom to choose, to move about, or to participate in the excitement of stories.

Though we have identified with Domenico's romantic hopes all along, Olmi has not let us share his vocational ones, for we have been biased against the bureaucracy from the moment that Domenico set foot in the glass and chrome monolith in downtown Milan. But it is during the course of the entrance exam that Olmi's perspective most obviously and

¹³ On this celebrated scene, see Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema*, p. 201.

irreversibly splits off from Domenico's.¹⁴ Like any long and involved selection process, its effect is to make the job seem more desirable in the candidates' eyes, while the silliness of the procedure reveals Olmi's judgment of the bureaucracy to which it gives access. The exam includes one simple math question, for which an entire hour is allotted, an essay (we are not made privy to the topic), and the pretentiously titled "psychotechnical" test involving a questionnaire to screen out homosexuals, alcoholics, bed-wetters, and manic-depressives. Domenico falters in the exam when he fails to act in a sufficiently mechanical way, answering "sometimes" to yes or no questions, and anticipating exercise orders ("palms up, palms down") before the orders are actually given. Though Domenico calls the exam "weird" when discussing it with Antonietta at the bus stop, this does not lead him to question the institution that authorizes such a selection process, nor to see the process as a distillation of the governing principles of corporate life. This would be to ascribe Olmi's viewpoint to Domenico in a fusing of perspectives that would prevent the protagonist from playing the naive *iron* so necessary an agent of the low-norm satire that Northrop Frye describes.¹⁵ But it is this very disparity of perspectives, and by extension, the satiric mode of the film itself, which makes the relationship between *Il posto* and neorealism a qualified one. A cardinal rule of literary and cinematic neorealism had been the abolition of authorial aloofness, which had characterized the prewar arts, now that the commonality of national experiences surrounding Fascism, the Resistance, and reconstruction had mandated a collective voice to recount the stories of the times. It is inconceivable, for example, that Rossellini would ever interpose an ironic distance between himself and Pina, Manfredi, or Don Pietro, for to do so would be to question their individual commitments to freedom and jus-

¹⁴ On Olmi's dual perspective, see Mast, *A Short History*, p. 360; and Liehm, *Passion and Defiance*, p. 203.

¹⁵ See *The Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 226.



9. Domenico (Alessandro Panzeri, center) waits with the other applicants on the morning of the entrance examination for the job.

rice, and therefore to impugn the entire Resistance movement which was the sum total of such popular stirrings. There is in *Bicycle Thief*, however, one episode in which a divergence of perspectives is momentarily introduced, only to be dismissed in the renewed urgency of our identification with Antonio's quest. This is the restaurant scene in which the Riccis are seated next to a wealthy family for whom money is obviously no object in the pursuit of culinary pleasures. Though food and drink have restored Antonio's flagging spirits, he grows morose at the spectacle of such carefree consumption at the next table. "To pay for a meal like that," he tells Bruno, "you'd have to earn . . . I don't know . . . about a million a month." Though the camera is relentless in showing the vulgarity and ostentation of these middle-class family members, Antonio is all admiration for their affluence, oblivious to the political reasons for which De Sica and Zavattini take them to task. A similar authorial judgment had been made on the wealthy dispensers of charity at the paupers' church, but this did not entail an ironic division of perspectives, for Antonio had no aspirations to their station, seeing them only as obstacles to his search for the thief. The family in the restaurant, on the other hand, obviously represents a goal for Antonio's material strivings, and not an object lesson for him in the abominations of the capitalist system, as De Sica and Zavattini would have it. Antonio is neither the Marxist that his membership in the trade union might suggest, nor the social critic that De Sica's camera is, but the unquestioning product of a society that rewards power and wealth with more power and wealth, and excludes those outside the economic treadmill from ever setting foot on it. Since he will never accede to the next table in the restaurant, De Sica need not prolong this momentary disparity between his perspective, which comes from direct knowledge of the meaning of affluence, and Antonio's, which comes from the want of it.

But Domenico will some day be seated at the next table in

the restaurant, and therefore his story invites the sustained split perspective that Antonio's and Umberto D's warranted only fitfully. What revolution never accomplished, the economic miracle did, yet at such an ideological price that the unified neorealist perspective was forever ruptured. The achievement of mass prosperity without the attendant political ideals of justice and equality for which the partisans and the early neorealists fought sets a latter-day neorealist like Olmi apart from his characters, who are so dazzled by the display of consumer items in the shop windows of downtown Milan that they unwittingly sell their souls for more purchasing power. Satire is one of the luxuries of this society whose heroic postwar past forbade a critical perspective on its protagonists, but whose newly acquired prosperity demands it.

If Olmi's cinema is to be compared to De Sica's neorealist work, we would do well then to insist that the younger director be seen not as a throwback to an earlier era, but as a modernizer of it, who understands the aesthetic of *Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D* and updates it for the Italy of 1961. That internal tendency which spelled the end of orthodox neorealism—the splitting off of the authorial perspective from that of the protagonists, momentarily in *Bicycle Thief*, more frequently and drastically in *Umberto D*, becomes the basis of Olmi's approach in *Il posto* where a lack of shared cultural values makes the early neorealist consensus an impossibility for Restoration Italy.¹⁶

It is the deterioration of the work ideal which constitutes Olmi's most devastating commentary on the Restoration, given the sovereign status that human labor occupies in the filmmaker's hierarchy of activities. "The world of work, the men

¹⁶ Olmi puts it another way when he departs from the early neorealists in his insistence on authorial intervention. "There are many ways to translate reality: one can hide oneself before it, as the first neorealists do—Rossellini, De Sica—or one can force oneself to give it a meaning through editing. I belong to this second category." Tassone, *Parla il cinema*, II, p. 181.

who work. I think that I'll never tire of this extraordinary theme that subsumes so many others."¹⁷ Olmi's emphasis on the work ideal is a measure of the failure of a society that cannot offer meaningful employment to its populace, substituting bureaucratic busywork for the proud products of genuine human labor. Yet Olmi's point is less to map out revolutionary correctives to the social ills he documents than to use "the medium to explore our problems."¹⁸ "We are living in a particularly historic moment," he told Gideon Bachmann. "We have left behind a rural culture . . . and we are going toward a new civilization which we don't yet understand. . . . The discomfort we feel is caused by the fact that we are not yet capable of mastering the reality we now confront of balancing our spirit with our physical environment. Our new films express this."¹⁹ In Domenico's accession to manhood, Olmi is figuring Italy's economic coming of age, but like the culture that psychologically lags behind its material development, Domenico clings to adolescence. "You're a big boy now. You're going to work," his mother reminds Domenico as he atavistically bickers with his younger brother over the ownership of a schoolbook strap. In his daily commute from the small town of Meda to the big city for work, Domenico recapitulates the creeping urbanization which will transform Italy into a modern, industrialized nation on a par with her neighbors to the north. But Domenico's provincial innocence ill prepares him for life in the big city, where he flounders in the coffee shop and must follow Antonietta's knowledgeable movements in handling cup and saucer. "Domenico suits you," Antonietta says later at the bus stop. "You're old-fashioned like your name." Even Domenico's hometown of Meda is undergoing the change from rural vil-

¹⁷See *Film*, 1962, ed. Vittorio Spinazzola (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), p. 170. According to Brunetta, Olmi is the director most qualified to document the postreconstruction Italian workplace by virtue of his own decade-long employment at Edisonvolta. See his *Storia*, pp. 652-53.

¹⁸Bachmann, "Ermanno Olmi," p. 542.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

lage to bedroom suburb of industrialized Milan.²⁰ As Domenico and Franco make their way to the train station that first morning, the spectacle of a horse-drawn plow juxtaposes the rural prehistory of the town with its technological present and future. "We live in an atmosphere of uneasiness, of worried expectation," Olmi told Bachmann, "and only through accidental openings do we see a glimmer of our new, future lives."²¹ Domenico's future is embodied in the witnessed, frustrated examples of his new colleagues in the inner office, just as his family past is embodied in his worker father and, still further back, in the peasant ancestors implied by the horse-drawn plow of Meda. "Does the future present itself to you without hope?" the psychologist at the entrance exam had asked. In the final image of the film, Domenico's eyes give their own answer to this question as they contemplate the bitter fulfillment of Antonio Ricci's unrealized dreams.

²⁰As Olmi told Samuels, the film is set in the suburbs of Milan, which used to be an agrarian zone. Consequently, Domenico's ancestors were probably farm workers there. See *Encountering Directors*, p. 111. On the urbanization of the peasant population and the consequences of upward mobility, see Olmi's remarks in Tassone, *Parla il cinema*, II, pp. 215-16.

²¹Bachmann, "Ermanno Olmi," p. 542.