

Fourth generation

The sweet life

There are a few films whose title encapsulates the very spirit of a period. Such was the case of Raoul Walsh's *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and of *La dolce vita* (*The Sweet Life*, 1960). However, the legend of the fabulous twenties was contrived subsequently, during the Great Depression when, by comparison, the previous decade looked happy and prosperous. On the other hand, the members of the fourth generation of cinema-goers, those who reached 20 at the beginning of the 'economic miracle', were often convinced that theirs was a sweet life and bestowed on their own days the title of Fellini's film.

From the middle of the 1950s to the middle of the 1970s, structural transformations, namely greater applied scientific knowledge, a market-based industrial economy, and the rise of an urban society, triggered a sustained expansion in the retailing of consumer goods.¹ With modernization, the economic benefits of domestic self-sufficiency and the saving of money vanished, but for people to recognize this and act accordingly required a radical change in attitudes. Family self-sufficiency, which was a necessity, especially on farms, was ideologically justified by traditional values supported by religion, the kinship system and gender roles. For this to evolve, a new cultural environment, dominated by secular, individualistic rationality, had to arise. To what extent did mental attitudes and expectations really alter? This is a question open to discussion. It has been argued, for instance, that the rapid decline in the birth rate, one of the most impressive features of Italian demography since the middle of the twentieth century, must be seen not as cultural 'modernization' but rather as the realization of traditional values of home and family in a world of new opportunities. The fact remains that people believed that a new era had begun. What part did the cinema play in the spread of that conviction?

FAITH IS THE MIRACLE

A miracle is something which mere man is not capable of bringing about, which is 'impossible', but which is nevertheless accepted as true. If there

Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema, 1896-1996*
(London: Routledge, 1996)

is no miracle without faith, faith is enough to give a miracle its identity. I am not disputing the fact that tremendous changes occurred from 1950 onwards. The growth, in the post-war period, of Italian industrial production in sectors as crucial as electricity, motor vehicles and chemicals, and the rate of this growth relative to that in other European countries, are statistical truths. But the process of calculating people's expectations by aggregating figures may be misleading. The numbers produced by such an exercise tell us nothing about how material progress was perceived at the time. There is probably a gap between the precise dates to which the figures refer and the dates on which perceptions were formed. What concerns us here is not economic growth itself but its social effects and its relationship to entertainment.

The classical interpretation of the advent of a consumer society was offered by Visconti whose film, *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) attempts to show how the poorest were involved in the boom, how much it cost them and what benefits it brought them. A countrywoman from southern Italy who can no longer live in her village migrates to Milan with her sons. The family settles in the basement of a multi-storey building and the boys look for work. In a somewhat schematic manner, the film explores the four possible solutions: unskilled work, theft, technical studies leading to a specialized job, and boxing. Visconti puts particular emphasis on the last-named, which seems to him to be a metaphor for the alienation imposed by capitalism. A sporting activity has been turned into a brutal business that exploits young men, obliges them to sell their body and corrupts everyone associated with them. However, while one of the boys fails, the others get on very well. The family moves to a small flat, then to a large, well-furnished, light flat on the outskirts of Milan. The price is the division of the family. The boys have to work in different districts, they will soon become estranged from each other.

La dolce vita was released just a few months before *Rocco*. This was not mere coincidence: both films were concerned with the explosion of signs of prosperity in the late 1950s. Fellini's main character, Marcello (played by Marcello Mastroianni), a reporter for a gutter-press newspaper, is prying into rich people's business and is so involved in this circle that he is unable to stand aloof from it. The film is built upon a clever dichotomy between the protagonist, who has no opinion, no personal view, and the film itself which follows him from afar, as if there were always a veil, or a barrier between the characters and the public. 'This world, the world of the richest, is not yours,' spectators are told. Visconti developed the same idea in his film. At the beginning of *Rocco*, the family, who have landed in Milan late at night, cross the town by bus. Mother and sons marvel at the fantastic sight of brightly lit windows but they merely see them from a closed vehicle which will not stop before they reach their gloomy suburb. Later, one of the boys takes his girlfriend for a walk. They sit on



Plate 21 Anouk Aimée in *La dolce vita* (1960, Federico Fellini)

the low wall of a luxurious restaurant, just for the pleasure of watching, but a waiter orders them to go away: 'This is not for you, folks.'

The unprecedented outburst of economic and technological energy which occurred during the 'miracle' represented, for most Italians, simultaneously a palpable reality and a mirage. One of the brothers, in *Rocco*, works hard to get a degree. Some day this young man, born in an out-of-the-way village, will be a white-collar worker, maybe an engineer. His will be a serious life, that will stand no comparison with the existence of Fellini's main character. Marcello prefers to court women, pander to their obsessions, linger in pubs and saloons, anything rather than undertake serious work. In different, almost opposed ways, Visconti and Fellini tried to chart a generational sensitivity, they described the experiences, hopes and attempts of young men living with the stimulating prospects offered by an economy on the up. But the journalist, born into a well-off provincial family, has no need to commit himself to anything, he can live for ever on the margin of fashionable circles, while Rocco's younger brother is obliged to perform well if he does not want to end up like Rocco in the Alfa-Romeo car factory.

Depicting aspects of contemporary Italian society, Fellini and Visconti stressed a few highly significant points. They suggested firstly that there was a wide gap between the beliefs and desires of two generations. Rocco's mother and Marcello's father stuck to the values of a limited, well-knit

community. Their sons insisted on a freedom in their work and behaviour which found its basis in a total involvement in economic progress. A second theme, developed mostly by Visconti, was the expansion of education which accompanied modernization and contributed to accelerate its pace. Between 1955 and 1965, the number of skilled technicians increased by 25 per cent, the number of university graduates by 33 per cent.² All these people found jobs even if, sometimes, they were obliged to take work which did not measure up to their qualifications. Wage-earners earned more money than they needed to keep their family but not enough to enable them to invest, so that, by the end of the 1950s, a surplus of money marked the shift from thrift to spending. A paradigmatic image of the period, reproduced in magazines and films, was that of the young shop-assistant who saved to buy a motorbike so he could take his girlfriend to the nearest beach. The emergence of new forms of deferred payment, the availability of ready-made clothes and motor cycles, profoundly altered people's conception of the domestic economy and exchanges. The theoretical respect for money and the habit of putting it away were debased by inflation or mere speculation and there was therefore no reason either to save it, or to make this debased currency the least cause for concern.

The question of wages and expenditure was closely linked to the evolution of the cinema. Both Fellini and Visconti demonstrated the spread of new forms of entertainment: music-hall, dance-hall and, above all, sporting competitions. Taking an interest in sport was the big fashion of the 'miracle' years, a passion common to all classes. Italians were extremely proud that the 1960 Olympic Games took place in Rome, and for a few weeks their capital city was the capital of the world. Experimental television was launched in 1952 with a talk on sports. Regular transmissions, which began in January 1954, included news and a weekly programme, *Sporting Sunday* (*Domenica sportiva*). Football, the most popular of all sports, became, in the 1960s, a source of permanent national interest. Sponsored by local industries which could 'buy' the best soccer players, the teams of Milan, Turin and other cities revived old rivalries between provinces. As can be seen in Table 2, money spent on sporting events increased slowly

Table 2 Cinema attendances, and spending on cinema and sport, 1955-75

	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975
sport (% of spending on entertainment)	5	5.5	6	8	10
cinema (% of spending on entertainment)	67	59	49	42	43
cinema attendances (millions)	819	745	680	530	513

but regularly. What does not appear in these figures is the growing importance of gambling. Totocalcio, a weekly wager on football, became a national activity in the 1960s and absorbed huge sums no longer available for spending on entertainment. Within the same decade, cinema takings declined rapidly, in correlation with the reduction in attendance.³

Many factors other than the interest aroused by football account for the decline of the cinema public. Contrary to what happened in Britain and Germany, television did not play a prominent part in the reduction of cinema attendance, at least until the mid 1960s, because TV programmes were of such poor quality. For a long time, people preferred to buy a vehicle rather than a television set, so that it took five years for the number of television sets to reach the million mark.⁴ *Sporting Sunday* on television can be considered an excellent barometer of television viewing. On average, it was watched by fewer than 2 million spectators until 1965; then, it jumped to 5 million in 1970 and to 9 million in 1975.⁵ Much more than television, it was the spread of labour-saving devices and electrical appliances which led people to save on entertainment. Oddly enough, films helped to legitimize the diminution in spending which would subsequently devalue them. They taught people how to live, how to occupy their empty hours. Cinema-goers tasted the life of the rich; they were introduced to an equality of consumption, which was not equality of status, but they were lured into believing that rich and poor could aspire to the same level of comfort and life-style. Let us take a very simple example. At the outset of Fellini's *8½* (1963), the protagonist is caught in a huge traffic jam. The same vision featured in many contemporary films. Now remember the car-free streets of many Neorealist films shot in big cities, Rome or Milan. Remember that the worker in *Bicycle Thieves* cycles quickly and easily from his distant block of flats to the city centre. The number of vehicles did increase enormously in the 1950s, but there is plenty of evidence of dramatic traffic congestion also in the late 1940s, as well as of the fluidity of road communication in the 1960s. The crowding of vehicles making any movement impossible is an everlasting commonplace which had already been exploited by Roman satirists. We must not forget that films are not sociological surveys but rather images based on factual observation, and that they cannot be taken at face value. Fellini revealed and exploited an obsession, common to many people. However caustic it was, his opening scene sanctioned a general conviction: ours is the era of individual means of transport, for better or worse we have to use cars.

Fellini's irony is typical of the disenchanting criticism which developed at the time in Italian comedies and which we shall explore shortly. Understanding that kind of irony required a modicum of attention, which some spectators did not accord because, for them, cinema should be purely and simply entertainment. Up to the mid-1950s, all Italians saw more or less

the same sort of movies. There were obviously differences of taste between the more and less educated but all films, American and Italian, circulated throughout the peninsula. The disruption of this shaky community was another aspect of the generation gap mentioned above. Two factors, one financial, the other ideological, account for that transformation.

Faced with an erosion of their audience, exhibitors reacted either by closing down (two thousand cinemas disappeared between 1955 and 1975) or by modifying their operation. Peripheral and rural cinemas, where tickets were still cheap, were left to fall to pieces. On the other hand, first-run cinemas were refurbished. While, in the early 1950s, the price of a seat could vary by a factor of one to six, fifteen years later, it varied by a factor of one to twelve. Consequently, a film shown to few people in a central picture theatre brought in more money than a film offered to many in a village. In 1975, first-run cinemas, which made up only one eighth of the total, received half the total box-office takings. Christopher Wagstaff has given an excellent explanation of how this logic of exploitation led the producers to make two types of film, 'quality' films, booked to national distributors at high prices, and 'quickies' booked to regional distributors.⁶ The theme of a film or its category were less important than the quality or otherwise of its script, its acting and shooting, and its sophistication. A very significant aspect of this division was the reluctance of 'quality' directors to shoot in colour, at a time when Hollywood had long been converted to this medium, only because black and white looked smarter. Visconti, who had experimented with colour in *Senso* (1954), went back to black and white with *Rocco and his brothers* until 1967 before opting definitely for colour. Antonioni and Fellini shot in black and white up to 1964 and 1965 respectively.

Another important element of this evolution was the spread of education. University students, who often went to the movies, created film societies to hire films which were no longer distributed. Some priests jumped at the opportunity to reinforce their influence among the youth. The Catholic Church was then going through what was called its 'up-dating'. Film-shows and debates about the moral or aesthetic value of movies were seen as a good way of attracting large audiences. Created by Catholics, Communists or atheists, Cine-forums were a big fashion in the 1960s and flourished even in small cities. One of their aims being to describe, analyse and discuss the films, they looked perfectly repulsive to spectators who were merely keen to enjoy amusing or thrilling images.

Intellectuals had long contrived to distinguish between 'mass' and 'elite' cultures, but a new term, the adjective 'popular', surfaced in the 1960s. The most sophisticated films, those which could be commented upon in film societies, were introduced into the realm of 'high' culture, together with classical music, opera and literature, while the 'quickies' were relegated to the realm of pulp fiction or rock 'n' roll. 'Popular' cannot be a

category of analysis, for this was merely speculation on the part of producers who, after calculating the chances of return on their investment, spent more or less money on shooting. In doing so, they contributed to creating a wide gap between two kinds of public. Christopher Wagstaff assumes that in suburban areas and small towns, spectators, confronted with loosely constructed stories full of thrills and excitement, let their attention fluctuate, carefully following the fights or chases but beginning to chat as soon as there was a pause in the action. If there were any truth in this idea, we could say that the cinema initiated Italians to channel-hopping.⁷ Paradoxically, while the inhabitants of the peninsula were increasingly bound together by economic and technological changes, while they looked and dressed increasingly alike, managed their money and affairs in ever more comparable ways, cultural practices and entertainment tended to estrange them from each other. In the nineteenth century, opera could temporarily unite all classes. In the 1960s, the managements of picture theatres divided them into fans of entertaining films and amateurs of intellectual movies. But, of course, the rupture must not be overstated. Strong links between individuals were perpetuated by family ties and regional activities which remained essential building-blocks of social life.

COMEDY ITALIAN STYLE

It also took a long time for the partition into two different publics to come into effect, especially in the most traditional sectors of Italian cinema. Up to now, I have avoided the word 'genre'. Genres never exist as pure types. For instance comedies and kindred forms, such as farce or slapstick, fall into the category of humour and it is hard to tell them apart. However, the triumph, at the time of the so-called 'economic miracle', of new patterns of comedy forces me to recall that, usually, a comedy is a temporary disruption of order which ends when routine is restored. Comedies are enjoyable because they pretend to question authority and rules. They are also harmless since they never threaten the law seriously. Camerini's and de Sica's films, which provisionally blurred class distinctions and then reinstated them thanks to that most common trick, a wedding, exemplify a formula which was highly appreciated in Italy, although it was by no means specifically Italian. The model survived in the 1950s and 1960s, notably with two famous series, the *Don Camillo* and the *Bread, Love and...* films. The *Don Camillo* films were constructed around an imaginary conflict between the parish priest and the mayor in a village of the Po valley. Generated by an ideological opposition between these two men, disorder was tempered by their mutual friendship but the third film of the cycle, *Don Camillo's Last Round* (1955), departed from this scheme. In this story, the mayor, a married man, who has fallen for a seductive young lady, is brought to his senses by Don Camillo. This

shift from public affairs to private concerns was decided by the producer because, in comedies, the main source of confusion is sexuality. The four *Bread, Love and . . .* films (1952-8) illustrated perfectly this theme, defined by the first in the series, *Bread, Love and Dreams*. The pretty Maria (whose part was played by Gina Lollobrigida) is courted by all the men of her village, bringing about jealousy and discord. Luckily, concord is re-established as soon as she gets married.

The last *Bread, Love and . . .* film was a flop, not because it was a repetition of the previous films but because, between 1952 and 1958, Italian studios had contrived a new style of dark comedy tales. These, the only comedies which can be genuinely labelled 'Italian style', since they look like no others, owed their success to showing unexpected moves in a game whose rules were dictated by the generic expectations of the public. While exploiting stocks of characters and plot ingredients, notably disorder, familiar to most viewers, the new trend excluded the morality that ran through preceding movies. A few decades later, in the mid-1990s during operation Clean Hands (*Mani pulite*) aimed at eradicating public corruption, Mirco Melancon could assume that the bribery revealed by the magistrates had long existed: it was first revealed by the 'Italian style' comedies.⁸

Released in 1958, the same year as the last *Bread, Love and . . .* film, *Persons Unknown* made fun of hold-ups and carefully planned robberies. Why should people run a serious risk when it is simpler to take advantage of a system which tolerates fraud? Many films reveal the circuits of bribery and corruption by dragging them into the foreground, exposing them to the full view of spectators. In these films, not only politicians but also the average Italian were supposed to use bribery and to be unscrupulous. Coming from all quarters, Italians invaded Rome to suborn politicians or civil servants likely to give them a share in public funds.

Comedies Italian style sold very well, not only in Italy but all throughout Europe and even in the United States. Their success cannot be attributed solely to their cynicism: they were also of excellent quality. Unlike the comedies of the 1930s, adapted from theatre plays, they were based on original texts written by professional scriptwriters including Furio Scarpelli, Age, Rodolfo Sonego. They were not content merely with imagining amusing puns, but also created visually interesting situations. The main parts were given to a cohort of young actors, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni, Alberto Sordi, Ugo Tognazzi, all born in the 1920s, who entered the studios after the war. Against the romanticism of Amedeo Nazzari and the elegance of de Sica, the newcomers imposed a casual, witty style more adapted to sarcasm and scepticism than to moralism. It is always dangerous to look for a relationship between the larger movements and tendencies of an epoch and the making of art works. However, when watching these comedies, I cannot

help noting correspondences with contemporary society. Let us take the example of *A Hard Life* (1961), shot by Dino Risi after a script supplied by Rodolfo Sonego. Alberto Sordi plays the part of an idealistic young man, Silvio, imbued with feelings of altruism, who cannot find a decent job. Having married an ambitious woman, and being obliged to make money for her, he begins to compromise. Being lucid, he sees everything with a critical eye, which enables the director to set out for us, in meticulous detail, the misdemeanours of the ruling class. Employed by a businessman, Silvio despises his uneducated, dishonest boss, while admiring him for his ability to con everybody and make money. The manager makes the best of the 'miracle'. Disgusted but impressed, Silvio is unable either to imitate his chief or to leave him.⁹

It is now clear that, far from being a consequence only of the boom, corruption was an inherited feature of Italian public life going back centuries. However, until the middle of the twentieth century, only the richest and most powerful profited from bribery. In his study on daily bribery, Franco Cazzola has explained how, during the decades which followed the war, more and more ordinary people obtained little perks like pensions, commercial licenses, success in exams, avoidance of taxes or fines.¹⁰ Of course, small traders or industrialists, place-seekers and clerks did not need films to know how to use the resources of their commune or province. The cinema was not a cause but a symptom of a general tendency to seek personal interest at the expense of the community.

And yet, there is something in these comedies which goes beyond the spirit of the time. The disorder in these stories is purely individual. Some protagonists, like Silvio, feel ill at ease, but their doubts do not lead them to warn their fellow citizens against the rules of clientelistic competition. What is more, the classical happy ending, marriage, is totally debased. Let us look at another film, *Divorce Italian Style*, released at the same time as *A Hard Life*. Baron Cefalù (Marcello Mastroianni), bored with his uninspiring wife, would like to marry his pretty cousin Angela, twenty years his junior. As divorce is not possible in Italy, Cefalù manoeuvres his wife into leaving with a lover and kills her. Deceived husbands being morally obliged to take revenge in Sicily, Cefalù can quietly marry Angela. The film has been interpreted as a plea for divorce – a reform which would be passed a few years later, in 1972. But the whole affair is told as if the crime were a mere trifle. The film is hilariously, scabrously funny throughout. Cefalù is not a hero, he is a selfish, decadent dabbler whose fussiness makes him prepare a murder like a business deal. The final wedding is not an end. The last image makes it obvious that Cefalù will soon be cuckolded – maybe eliminated by his second wife. Far from making for a happy ending, cinematic marriages were a source of disarray. Sordi was destroyed by his wife in *The Widower* (1959), again a film of Risi with a script by Sonego, while Ugo Tognazzi, twice eliminated by his

spouse, in *The Conjugal Bed* (1963) and *The Man Who Came for Coffee* (1970), became a complete wreck.

It can be argued that these films offered an image of the betrayal that men feared with independent women moving freely in an unconstrained social space – a space over which men had no longer control and where they could leave behind the sense of their manhood. I shall return to the problem later. What I want to stress here is the eclipse of a set of rules and tricks which, borrowed from the stage, had sustained amusing films for five decades. The portrayal of married life suggests the gap between the beliefs and desires of the third and fourth generations. The difference must not be taken at face value since, far from being destroyed, in Italy the family was still ranked above all other associations in terms of importance during the 1960s and 1970s. The previous generation used the household to express, symbolically, its wartime togetherness, its parochialism and its fear of foreign intrusions. The disintegration of kinship that runs through most of the comedies in the 1960s had nothing to do with the boredom of home life. It was comic, and gained its effect, by the simple fact that it was unexplained. And it was possibly a manifestation of bewilderment in front of galloping social upheaval.

BIG MONEY, GREAT FILMS?

Comedies proved to be very successful. They helped to ameliorate the position of Italian movies in the domestic market. During the first half of the 1950s, American films took 60 per cent of box-office receipts, while Italian films were reduced to 33 per cent. By the mid-1970s, the figures had totally changed: only 25 per cent went to Hollywood, and Italian movies took 65 per cent.

This explains why, despite a diminution in cinema audience, the Italians studios made more films in the 1960s and 1970s than in the 1950s. The peak year, 1972, witnessed 291 new releases compared with 114 in 1955, which was the best year for attendances. On the whole, the ten top money-makers, which were comedies and 'spaghetti westerns' received 20 per cent of the total receipts but a good half of the new films were flops. As in most periods, the financially most rewarding element of the film industry was exhibition, while production was not operating at a significant enough profit to be a worthwhile venture. Titanus gave up filmmaking in 1964 and concentrated on distribution, Lux closed down two years later. However, production did not decrease because, since the mid-1960s, Italy was involved in a programme of co-productions with France, Spain, Germany and with several Latin American countries. Once two companies, an Italian and a Spanish one for instance, had agreed on a project, both would invest money, tax refunds, when

obtainable, would come from two governments, and the film would be distributed in two markets. In 1972, 142 'Italian' films, about half of the total, were co-productions. The idea that a film should be tailored to suit the programming requirements of non-Italian audiences was a novelty. For a long time foreign investors had had to be content with co-investing rather than co-producing. An agreement with a foreign company meant that Italian studios were obliged to accept editorial and economic control over their products. The producers had to bargain at length over the script, crew, and casting before reaching a compromise. The financial aspect of the deals was extremely complicated. In many cases, three countries were involved. But many firms benefited from investment by American distributors operating in Europe so that defining the nationality of a film on the basis of the money invested was impossible. In a few cases, when the director could control the whole project, the co-operation of two companies helped make difficult films. Antonioni's *L'avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960), *La notte* (*The Night*, 1961), and *The Eclipse* (1962) were all co-produced. But, most of the time, greater commercial appeal was the spur, and companies decided to shoot commercial products likely to interest cosmopolitan audiences. Two series of films, the historical or mythological epics¹ and the 'spaghetti westerns', are the most characteristic products of international collaboration. Oddly enough, these films have often been called 'popular'. If 'popular' signifies a film which cannot please intellectuals, the label is not appropriate for the epics or westerns, which did very well in various social sectors and were watched, on their opening run, by upper- and middle-class audiences. If 'popular' means artless, the label is again ill-suited for there was much sophistication in several of these films. There was no homogeneity in these so-called series. Far from being 'mass produced' they were shot in different circumstances, by different crews and aimed a different audiences. Trying to analyse their themes and formulas to specify what is 'popular' would be totally misleading.

The first epics, released in 1958, *Hercules* and *The Rebellion of the Gladiators*, illustrate themes, mythological or historical, which, thanks to the development of secondary education, were familiar to many young people. However linear it was, the story could only be enjoyed by spectators able to pick out the references spread throughout the dialogues. The battles, well filmed and involving a large number of extras, were gripping, and the depiction of landscapes was excellent, but there was no attempt to create sensational effects. In the wake of these films, which were greatly appreciated, other companies tried to lure a larger public by reducing the plot to a mere pretext and multiplying the visual and sound tricks. But the most rewarding device was the introduction of a touch of eroticism. The male hero was caught between two female characters, a brunette and a blonde, both comely young women in short white skirts. Lips

half-open, shoulders naked, short hair fluttering about, the actresses cast a seductive glance alternately at their male counterpart and at the viewer and, at times, came to blows.

It must be recalled, here, that the fourth generation of cinema-goers was submerged by a wave of pornography. Female nudes and overt representations of sexual intercourse were offered in magazines, journals, books and films.¹² The top money-makers of the early 1970s are typical in this respect. *Malicious* (1973) explained how the bare thighs of a pretty maid could stir up the male section of a right-thinking family, Pasolini's *The Decameron* (1971) illustrated, in the most explicit way, some of Boccaccio's tales, while the main characters of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) spent their time making love, practising sodomy or masturbating. In comparison, the soft eroticism of the epics looked childish. A few of them sold well abroad and were even praised by foreign critics but in the peninsula their fame was short-lived.

The 'spaghetti westerns' were of much more relevance than the epics.¹³ They made more money to begin with. The takings of the biggest hit, *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) were five times those of the most successful epic. These Eurowesterns were often featureless, badly shot and badly edited. In a few instances they were also original. Parodying what Italo Calvino called 'a puerile cinematic convention',¹⁴ the fanciful, heroic wild West, they distorted it, thus creating an abstract space, a boundless wasteland which could not be likened to any existing country and was only fit for extravagant stories. The dialogues, which were dubbed in four or five languages, were laconic, the characters acted instead of talking, but noise or music were effectively substituted for the words. Up to the 1960s, the soundtrack was mostly used to supplement and decorate the images. With westerns, it stopped being a mere accompaniment of emotion. Working in close collaboration with their composers and sound engineers, directors made their drama emerge from the music, thrilling notes flooded empty landscapes, and accentuated their spell. Ennio Morricone's haunting scores, endlessly broadcast on radio and sold by the hundred in record stores, created an aura of mystery which incited people to be at the next film-show.

But 'spaghetti westerns' were particularly important for the atmosphere of brute force that they introduced on the screens. The violence was not celebrated, it was reported in cold blood, as when Henry Fonda, in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) resolutely killed a young boy who looked him straight in the face. Lost dare-devils enjoyed the fear that they caused and were themselves exploited by clever, wicked leaders. Even the most elaborate westerns indulged in a fantasy of sadism and brutality. Women had almost no part in the stories which featured only tough guys. Parallels or oppositions are often dangerous in cultural studies but I find it necessary to contrast the Italian westerns with the

Italian style comedies. Both depict a corrupt world. But bribery, which was soft, almost legal in the latter, became overtly ferocious in the former. Comedies took place in comfortable, urban surroundings, westerns in a lawless no-man's land. Above all, there was a striking difference in the representation of women. Would it be exaggeration to say that, in contrast to comedies which mourned masculine weakness and impotence, the Euro-westerns glorified male strength?

A SEASON FOR AWARDS

Westerns obtained their best results in first-run cinemas. The same spectators enjoyed, alternately, the films of Sergio Leone and those of Fellini and Antonioni. However, unlike the latter, Leone was given no award. In this way, critics and experts succeeded in creating a dividing-line between 'cultured' and 'popular' movies. The number of film festivals rose dramatically, throughout the world, in the 1960s and Italian cinema benefited greatly from their development. Fellini's *La dolce vita* and *8½* were both awarded eight international prizes, Antonioni's *L'avventura* won seven film awards, while five prizes went to Visconti's *Rocco*. I could fill a whole book with honours of that kind since Italian movies got an impressive proportion of film awards in the 1960s.¹⁵ Italian spectators had always been proud of the prizes won by Italian films. But, in this respect, there was a significant difference between the third and the fourth generation. The former, while satisfied at Italy's achievements, did not go to see a film simply because it had won an award, while the latter, at least in its most informed sector, selected its programmes according to the verdict of panels of judges.

Festivals created a category, the 'quality film', and told film buffs what they ought to see. The selection established by critics and journalists was part of film culture. It was also a guarantee offered to a public disconcerted by the changes that were affecting the very making of films. The fourth generation witnessed, sometimes in bewilderment, the advent of what was then called 'modernism'. This is an obscure term which can only be understood in relation to its opposite, classicism. A film was considered classical when its main aim was to tell a story, and when all its elements – dialogues, images and sounds – helped to develop the plot. On the other hand, modern films were meant to give their consumers an awareness of their process of construction. Spectators were required to pay attention to the components of the film, at the same time as enjoying the exaltation that following an interesting work of fiction can bring. Careful work on form allowed many unrelated sub-plots to blossom alongside the main story so that the fiction was not driven towards a predictable ending and, in some cases, had no conclusion. As was suggested by Gian Piero Brunetta, modern cinema compelled its public to 'complete

its meaning',¹⁶ so that, without the help of critics, many spectators might have been put off by films that were engaging one moment and disruptive the next. The most remarkable thing is that lots of viewers, not just a small group of fans, welcomed the 'modernist' films. This was due, in no small measure, to the work of the critics.

From a purely formal point of view, several Eurowesterns, Sergio Leone's for instance, could be called 'modern'. But they made no reference whatsoever to any specific context and their insistence on fanciful, extraordinary situations made them look more extravagant than modern. 'Modernist' films hinted at precise, often contemporary problems and were filled with details familiar to most viewers. In many cases, it would have been possible to choose the social context and read the films in this light. Let us look at Antonioni's *The Red Desert* (1964). The film begins with the visit of Corrado to his friend Ugo whom he has not seen for a long time. This might be an excellent opening for a confrontation between two worlds and two males. We are in the mid-1960s. Ugo is an engineer in one of the most promising industrial sectors, oil. Corrado's father once had a big estate, but land is no longer a good investment, the estate has been sold, and Corrado is obliged to emigrate to Argentina. Land against industry, a distressed man against a successful manager: even the following episodes, mostly centred upon Ugo's wife, could be analysed at that level. As emerges from this example, modernity was a matter of drawing out complex cinematic structures from simple initial motifs. It was also, as will appear later, an attempt to produce an effect of complexity by arduous work on temporality.

The late 1950s witnessed an outburst of cinematic inventiveness in most European countries. But while France, Germany, Greece and Spain had their 'new waves', nobody ever spoke of an 'Italian school', although there was as much innovation in the peninsula as elsewhere. This was partly due to the fact that several filmmakers – Visconti, Antonioni, Fellini – had made 'classical' films before opting for modernity. It must also be noted that the coherence of the story, however simple it was, and the emphasis on the part played by the leading actors were much more important for the Italians than for their European counterparts.

The case of Visconti, the most 'classical' of the directors, illustrates what changed around the year 1960. *Senso*, released in 1954, is about how a woman remembers her past and how she tells it to herself and to others. It is enclosed within a traditional framework of beginning (Countess Serpieri, who lives in Venice, then occupied by the Austrians, encounters Lieutenant Franz Mahler, an Austrian officer), middle (their love affair) and end (their mutual betrayal, which results in the execution of Mahler). Here history (the war between Austria and Italy) and individual story matched perfectly. On the other hand, they seemed to be loosely connected in Visconti's successive 'historical' movies, *The Leopard* (1963), *The*

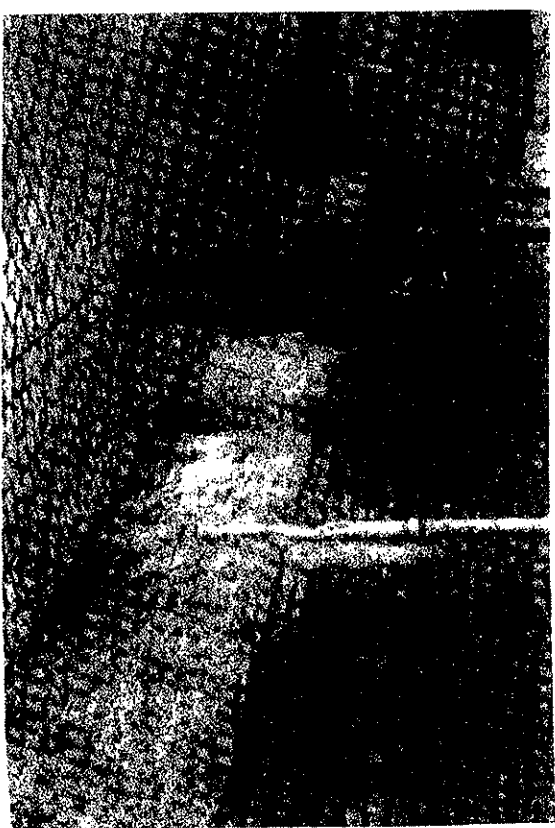


Plate 22 *The Red Desert* (1964, Michelangelo Antonioni)

Damned (1969) and *Ludwig* (1971). The first and the third of them could have been titled *A Chronicle of Empty Seasons*, for there are very few events. As they have long done before, the Leopard, Prince Salina, and his family spend the spring on their estate near Palermo, leave the torrid plain for another palace, somewhere in the hills, in summer, and come back to Palermo in winter. Ludwig, King of Bavaria, goes hunting, courts his cousin, feasts with handsome young men. However, these timeless rituals develop against crucial historical backgrounds: in *The Leopard* it is early 1860s, from Garibaldi's disembarkation in Sicily to the defeat of the great leader by the royal army, the months during which the Bourbons lose their kingdom and Sicily becomes Italian; in *Ludwig* it is the time of the creation of the unified German Reich. These facts seem of little relevance for people more preoccupied with trifles than with political issues. Side stories, such as the affair between Salina's nephew and a pretty young lady, or Ludwig's failed engagement, are important parts of the films, as was the depiction of social pleasures or obligations. *The Damned* takes place during the first months of Hitler's rise to power. Nazism provides a gloomy atmosphere for the depiction of a series of perversions or misdemeanours. Here, as in the two other films, the picture is structured to culminate in a brilliant sequence of happenings, which are,

respectively, in *The Leopard*, the ball in which Salina dazzles Sicilian high society; Ludwig's drinking orgy with his friends; and, in *The Damned*, the massacre of Hitler's opponents during a wild homosexual party.

Visconti's 'modernism' was not far from Sergio Leone's since both directors aimed more at giving their spectators visual and aural gratification than at offering the pleasure of understanding. Leone's *For a Few Dollars More* features a man from nowhere who wants neither money nor power and gets involved in an obscure quarrel which is no concern of his. Visconti and Leone centred their films round an actor, Burt Lancaster and Helmut Berger for the former, Clint Eastwood for the latter, whose ability to give a spirited performance was fully exploited, and whose gestures and show of feelings were widely exposed, for their own sake. The details of the plot and its progression were not the most important aspect of the films; rather, the public was asked to enjoy the quality of the shooting, the clever matching of images and sounds and, above all, the perfect production of the most impressive scenes.

Actors, considered as figures, as bodies liable to be endlessly photographed, were central to modernism. This peculiarity often went unnoticed at the time because actors no longer personified well-defined characters, as was the case previously. And yet, the actors did not play empty, ill-defined roles, the social status of the protagonists was perfectly clear, as has been explained for *The Red Desert*, the characters were meant to have a job and were even portrayed carrying out their activities. Daily life was not forgotten but its impact on the fate of the characters was never clear. More importantly, these fictional people were deprived of conscience, spectators did not watch the world through their eyes and were not informed of their state of mind. It must be added that there was relatively little action in most movies. Fellini's *Cabiria's Nights* and *La dolce vita* were made up of different episodes which could have been edited in a different order without modifying the general trend of the movie. At the outset of the former film, Cabiria, a Roman prostitute, has just been cheated by a crook; when the film ends, she has again been deceived and she is all set to be abused many more times. Trying to 'understand' her would be useless since she is nothing but actress Giulietta Masina performing with various supporting actors in different sets. Antonioni's films were also modulations round a woman (usually Monica Vitti) and her relation to a man, another woman or even to herself. The characters were inserted in precise surroundings (an area of land devastated by industrial plants in *The Red Desert*) but it was up to the viewer to decide to what extent they were affected by their milieu. Long sequences of uncertainty, where 'nothing happened', appealed to the attention of the public because they seemed to contradict the strongly marked poles of exposition and social description which were always treated with care.



Plate 23 Monica Vitti in *The Eclipse* (1962, Michelangelo Antonioni)

Contemporary audiences were interested and puzzled, they wondered what these works were about. There was no answer to the query. However, it could have been argued that the films were about time, about cinema and about spectators. The stories often covered only a few days and the brief time span accentuated the dramatic tension. Antonioni's *La notte* (1961) begins one afternoon and ends at dawn. Its two leading characters are involved in different sub-plots and meet various people. Their life looks like that of Milan socialites. But the constant shifting from one to the other made it impossible to find continuity in their actions and the sudden introduction of long shots, which seem to alienate the protagonists from the scenery, create a distance between actors and spectators. What is depicted is not the routines of an ordinary night but the impossibility of showing that night, of making sense of even such a short period. Time is also abolished in Pasolini's *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (1966). It is questioned in *8½* where past, present and possibly future are muddled. Relaxing for a few days in a spa, that is, spending long empty hours in a dead city where people have landed up by chance and have nothing to do but wait for their departure, the protagonist of *8½* mixes

up his activities, his dreams, his memories and his fantasies. This is not a trip into the past, a man's attempt to go over his life again. There is no chronological progression, various periods intermingling as if, time being frozen, the same person could be simultaneously adult and child. The exciting final parade, in which everyone in the protagonist's life, the living and the dead, form a circle and start to dance around him, represented as a young boy, could be considered a promise of rebirth, or a definitive confinement to childhood.

By refusing to adopt a consecutive order in which events follow regularly one after the other, the modern films offered their characters a wide range of options and trajectories. This is what Pasolini explored with *The Hawks and the Sparrows* when he made Totò, the comic actor, travel in a timeless space where different periods coexisted and where Totò, both a merciless landlord and a pitiful tenant, spoke the language of birds in medieval times and witnessed the expansion of cheap air travel. The three examples mentioned here show that there was no concerted effort to investigate the very nature of duration. Some directors were more interested in the significance of the moment, of any moment. Others pondered the weight of immobility. Still others fought against historical determinism. There were also personal inflections: Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965) showed how a woman could free herself from her past. Pasolini's *Theorem* (1968) is a fable in which an emissary from nowhere metamorphoses, one after the other, the members of a family. What was at the core of these meditations was an interrogation on the function of rhythm in films. Narration was suspect because it offered a single-minded, logical view of things. But nobody was in a position to suggest an alternative solution, which explains why the same filmmakers could, successively, disturb and then re-establish a chronological order.

Modernism was therefore an inquiry on the potentialities of cinema, not a struggle to describe the world. The stories told in the films, the characters, the actors were used to scrutinize the mode of operation of the cinema. Marcello Mastroianni had the leading part in *La dolce vita*, *La notte* and *8½* in which he was respectively a journalist, a writer and a film director. Sociologists could say that, after depicting workers (*Rocco and His Brothers*, Antonioni's *The Cry*, 1957) and drop-outs (Fellini's *La Strada* (*The Road*), *The Swindlers* and *Cabiria's Nights*), modern filmmakers turned towards their own social group, middle-class intellectuals. This would be perfectly true but would merely explore the external appearance of the films. Mastroianni played the role of filmmaker Guido Anselmi in *8½*. But Anselmi himself, being unable to make a new film, plays the part of a creative director, ready to shoot again, in front of his producer, technicians, actors and friends. Bombarded with questions, he has to find the right way of answering without giving an answer – in other words of pretending. This was not very different from the role Mastroianni played

in *La notte*. There, he was a novelist invited to parties where he had to behave as a novelist. Role-playing in ordinary life (the part we 'play' to give others an image of ourselves) has often been studied by sociologists. This is not what was at stake in the films mentioned here since Mastroianni was first and foremost an actor. The point was rather to illuminate the fictitious nature of theatrical or cinematic performances. Wittingly or not, modern cinema took the opposite course to Neorealism and warned its public that any film was a fabrication whose only reference was not life itself, but cinema. Fellini's title was itself a warning: having already completed seven feature length films and three shorts, the director was shooting his 'eighth and a half' movie. In contrast to offering an illusion of transparency, modern films stressed the importance of technical devices and practicalities. Instead of effortlessly operating his mental film of memories and fantasies, Guido Anselmi was brought back to reality by cinema itself, he was obliged to care about sets, script and actors, and to make it clear that filmmaking is a job, not a pastime.

Modern films were appreciated because they obliged their public to be very attentive, and they were criticized because they appeared too demanding. Following them demanded a deep involvement. Usually, they exposed a situation, but they seldom raised a precise, well-defined problem, and they never advanced a solution. We have noted that *8½* can reasonably be interpreted in totally opposed ways. Antonioni's films often portrayed a couple on the verge of breaking up, but the film ended before anything has been decided. Corrado, in *The Red Desert*, makes love to Ugo's wife and then leaves. What will happen to him and to the woman? Maybe nothing, because, after all, fictional heroes do not survive the fiction of which they are part. The characters in these films were not given an appearance of existence, they were kept aloof, silent, deprived of evident feelings, as if they only existed for and by way of the film camera. In some cases, it was even difficult to decide what was taking place on the screen. Who is the visitor who disturbs a quiet family in *Theorem*? An angel, a devil or a mirage? Has he upset them to make them better or worse? Biblical quotations suggest that he is sent by God, but who is this God who wants to destroy people? Commenting on this film, Pasolini said that 'each thing represents another'. Spectators had to find personally what denoted what, or to conclude that parables defy interpretation. The looseness of the plot, the lack of precise indications, the absence of final elucidation induced contrasting responses in the public. Viewers could forget the narrative to focus on the images themselves. The protagonists of *L'avventura* and *The Eclipse*, Totò in *The Hawks and the Sparrows*, roam at length in uncharacteristic surroundings. It is tempting to forget them and to let one's mind wander for a few minutes. But there is also, in these seemingly empty sequences, a profusion of stylistic marks likely to catch the spectator's attention. In *L'avventura*, a man, who is courting

a young woman, begins to pet her and put his hand on her thigh. This shot is briskly interrupted by another shot of Monica Vitti looking at the couple; although the actress does not manifest any feeling, this second shot is rather long; then, the film goes back to the shot of the couple; both actors are exactly where they were at the end of the initial shot, as if the scene had not been interrupted by the picture of Monica Vitti. Here, one might be tempted to say that the timing is 'wrong', at least from a purely narrative point of view. The long shot of Monica Vitti has annulled the sexual tension created by the gestures of the man; it has also frozen the couple, whom spectators now see through the expressionless gaze of the actress. In another sequence in the same film, the male protagonist kisses Monica Vitti; the public sees her laughing, but there is no noise and it is only after a lengthy silent pause that the laughter can be heard. I do not want to give too many examples, I merely want to stress the distance between the unfolding of the fiction and its representation. Extended, attentive takes which imposed concentration and underplaying on the actors' part, abrupt breaks in the editing process, hazardous synchronization between images and sound seem to imply a dry, immasurable distance from the characters. Spectators had to face what Naomi Green has called a 'hermeneutic impulse... demanding a process of interpretation',¹⁷ they were reminded that the actors play a role, that the noises are not real noises but recorded ones, put on the soundtrack to create an impression in their minds, and that it was up to them to decide whether they wanted to immerse themselves in the story or to take the fiction for what it is, that is to say merely a gripping, enjoyable fantasy.

VULNERABLE FATHERS, DANGEROUS WOMEN

In *L'avventura* and *The Eclipse*, Monica Vitti, playing the role of an independent woman, was the main character and that in itself was a novelty. Before the 1960s, women were seldom, if ever, given the leading role in Italian cinema. Films portrayed two distinct kinds of women which, separately and together, fulfilled a symbolic role. The first category, by far the most important, was the mother who carried the weight of continuity in family life. Women as mothers helped maintain men's sense of virility by enabling them to become fathers. A second group was made of *femmes fatales*, pleasure-loving and harmful. They were the image of the betrayal that men feared and the ones who usually ended up punished. Italian films had much to tell about men, women and relations between the sexes. But they did it in the framework of traditional family relations and they did not make gender an essential element for the development of their plot since women were always depicted in relation to men.

On the other hand, looking at the comedies, historical or mythological epics and westerns offered to the fourth generation of cinema-goers, we

have found a different, rather critical vision of independent women involved in business and politics. We have noted that these stories, be they amusing, thrilling or melodramatic, accord little mercy to any female character cast in a role beyond that of obedient wife, tender mother or innocent daughter. Comedies often refer to situations, places and people of which spectators are more or less knowledgeable, and it could be claimed that, in the 1960s, amusing films mirrored some aspects of the emancipation of women. But epics or westerns, which were entirely fictional, could not bear any similarity to the social context. The perfectly autonomous woman, such as portrayed by Claudia Cardinale in *Once Upon a Time in the West* or Monica Vitti in *The Eclipse* – that is to say, the woman who lives on her own, bargains with men, runs her business very effectively, was an invention of the 1960s. Obstinate and tough, she was sometimes an object of desire (Claudia Cardinale or Monica Vitti) but more often of fear, which gave her an ambiguous status. In Dino Risì's comedy *The Widower* (1959) the wife, a tenacious businesswoman, does not conceal her dislike for her husband. Instead of playing the part of a relaxed winner, Alberto Sordi has the role of a miserable loser. *Last Tango in Paris* is about an ageing man who, having long been henpecked by his wife, falls for a younger woman; they have an affair, but she jilts and then kills him. The tragedy in the background of Visconti's *Of a Thousand Delights* (1967) was that, during the war, a man had been denounced to the Germans by his wife.

All these images, which were fairly commonplace, contained with them a violent tension. Why? It is always impossible fully to account for representations and what I am going to suggest is based more on assumption than on evidence. A first notable issue was the strong influence of Freudian psychoanalysis in Italian social and cultural life during the 1960s. Freud was translated much later into Italian than into other European languages but, within a decade, his vocabulary and most simple concepts were accepted even by people not interested in mental disorders. Journalism,¹⁸ daily talks, art works were filled with Freudian ideas. Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* (1967) explored a myth revisited by Freud. Instead of telling the myth as it is exposed in Greek tragedies, the filmmaker started from psychoanalysis; the sphinx, in his film, is a metaphor of Oedipus's unconscious that the protagonist censures by killing him; Oedipus is in fact aware of his own incestuous drive – so much so that, unlike the mythical hero, he is able to make love to his mother after learning who she is. *Medea* (1969), another film directed by Pasolini, evoked, according to Naomi Green, Freud's exploration of 'the primal collective consequences of the Oedipus complex'.¹⁹ Visconti's *The Damned* and *Death in Venice*, Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* and *The Conformist* pointed clearly to psychoanalysis. In the last-named a tormented intellectual offers his services as an assassin to Mussolini's secret police to overcome his Oedipus

complex and assuage the guilt induced by his latent homosexuality. *8½* can be interpreted as a light-hearted homage to Freud. In this movie, Guido's dreams and fantasies have something of a mausoleum devoted to the commemoration of his infancy since the memory of his absent parents is always present on the screen. Behaving like a child, treating others as children, the character is looking for an ideal mother who will care for him and tell him what to do. His carnal thoughts are deliciously cut short by his mother, or by religious figures who seem to look upon him accusingly. Furthermore he has built up in his fantasies an incestuous relationship with his wife to such an extent that when kissing the latter's lips he imagines he is bending over his mother.

For two decades, playing with Freud was a fashion. Cinema was not alone in making psychoanalysis one of the most appreciated intellectual gadgets of the time, but it made a substantial contribution to it. There was, obviously, something more urgent and concrete than a mere fancy behind this infatuation with the unconscious and its operations. Athos Magnani, the protagonist of Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem*, arrives in the village where his father was killed during the Fascist era. The father is regarded as a local hero, his name is to be found everywhere, in the streets and on buildings, but his murderer has never been unmasked. One night, Athos goes to the cemetery and destroys the inscription engraved in honour of his father. An 'Oedipal' attempt to eliminate the parent of the same sex? Presumably. But it soon transpires that the hero was in fact a traitor and that his political friends, having killed him, made his death into that of a martyr. What is striking, here, is the distance and the conflict between two generations. Past and present overlap in many films of the decade: kitsch or art deco were used not merely for the pleasure of re-creating the Italy of the late nineteenth century or of the 1930s, they helped to emphasize the inadequacy, the hopelessness of the previous age-group, especially of the fathers. Mastroianni witnesses the degradation of his fictional father in *La dolce vita* and buries him alive in *8½*. There is a defective father in *L'avventura*, a deficient mother in *The Eclipse* and unsound older characters in a good many movies.²⁰ Freud called the stories children tell themselves to modify imaginarily their ties with their environment 'family romances',²¹ an expression which is relevant to many films of the 1960s. A simplistic version of psychoanalysis was an opportunity for a *mise-en-scène* of phantasies that viewers could accept or not, according to their own wishes. When watching *8½* or *The Spider's Stratagem*, spectators either tried to establish a chronological order in the constant inter-cutting of different periods, or found pleasure in oedipal conflicts consonant with their own mental structures.

In many cases, the invented fathers had failed because they were betrayed by women. An air of diffidence is perceptible in many films;

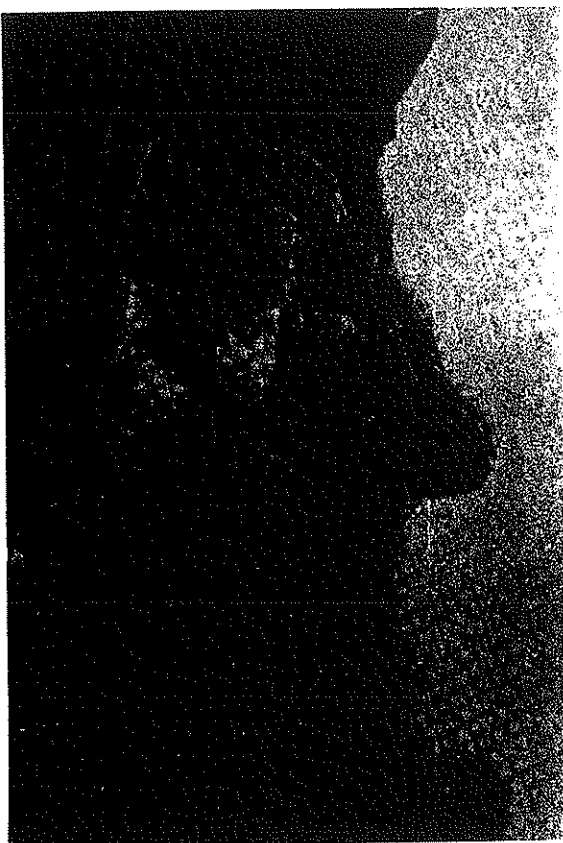
while it may not be found in Antonioni's, it is very common in other directors. Its most obvious function was to show that independent women were likely to destabilize a gendered equilibrium rooted in male domination. However, I do not think that we should link this up to the autonomy recently won by female workers since few women carried any great responsibilities in their jobs. The roles attributed to Monica Vitti or Claudia Cardinale in the above-mentioned movies were fanciful and did not reflect the social division of tasks. Weak fathers and untidy women were inventions, mirages which helped men define themselves by contrast. Now, this is merely a hypothesis which cannot be proved. Historians can analyse the ideological message of an art work, but they cannot describe adequately how spectators felt and responded to these messages at the time. And yet, they have to take into account images as recurrent as the ones we have just studied.

WHERE IS ITALY TO BE FOUND?

Another theory might be that the filmmakers were settling old scores with Mussolini. Apart from Francesco Rosi, whom we shall meet shortly, Italian directors, not being politically committed, combined Fascism, the period in which they had grown up, with their own family story. Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) was a nostalgic evocation of the Mussolini era in which the protagonist's father, an anti-Fascist, was as ineffectual as the Fascist leaders. Meanwhile Bertolucci, in *The Spider's Stratagem*, challenged by implication all the members of the preceding generation. 'What have we inherited? What do we look like today? How has Italy changed since we were born?' might be the questions that cinematographers attempted to answer.

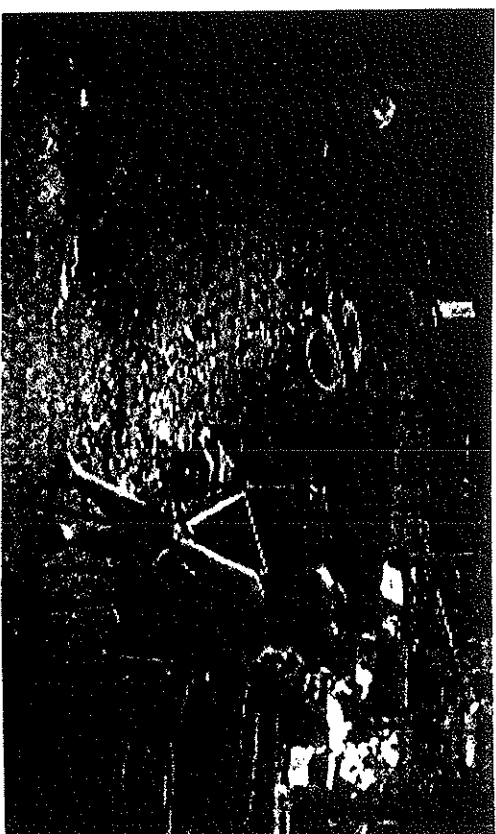
The assumption is supported by the fact that, from 1955 to 1975, filmmakers were motivated to an unusual degree by place. Previously, the cinematic vision of Italy did not matter very much, it was used mostly as a background. Films made after the middle of the 1950s, instead of being grouped into themes or chronological clusters, could be divided into locations. There are for instance, in Antonioni's films, the northern, rainy movies (*The Cry*, *The Red Desert*) and the southern, sunny ones (*L'avventura*, *The Eclipse*). The idea of looking at the scenery was a hallmark of the fourth generation of cinema-goers. Cinematic society was described in terms of movement, and also of resistance to that movement.

However, Italian directors did not make tourist films. Some of them went so far as to show that Italy did not exist.²² In *La strada*, Fellini opened a window upon the land that lay behind the official face of the country, the face usually presented to foreign visitors. An athlete, Zampano, and his helpmate, Gelsomina, travel from village to village,

Plate 24 *La strada* (1954, Federico Fellini)

performing pathetic stunts for miserable audiences. They are both victims, incapable of understanding the conditions that have shaped them; Zampano is a brute concerned only with wine and fast women, Gelsomina is simple-minded. The film captures superlatively the simple things which interest them, the efforts and brief pleasures of a dull life. But the characters, who have lost touch with any form of culture and have failed to become assimilated into the universe of fairground entertainers, have no environment, in the proper sense of the word. They settle on waste ground and wander on noisy, potholed roads. Pasolini was even more critical, since his films nullified Rome itself. Exploring the shanty-towns on the edge of the Italian capital city, *Accattone* (1961) shows how their ugliness and neglected state cut the inhabitants off from other Italians. *The Hawks and the Sparrows* covers an ill-defined journey, a random wandering in an urban wasteland. Totò and Ninetto Davoli, playing a father and his son, make an engaging, bizarre pair, both naive and sardonic, who stroll through a fantasy desert made up of pictures taken in a real world, the outskirts of Rome. They meet various people who live apparently isolated, contingent lives and the purposelessness of their peregrinations illustrates the utter emptiness of the Eternal City.

Cinematic landscapes were not sets likely to enliven film plots, they were signs used because of their expressive value. The fact that panoramas were never shot for themselves is exemplified by the contrast between Antonioni

Plate 25 *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (1966, Pier Paolo Pasolini)

and Bertolucci who worked in the same area, the Po valley. For the former, this was the realm of dampness, of water dripping everywhere, of fog. The latter depicted the same region as the country of sun where the main danger was water, which prevented people from moving freely and in which they drowned (*Before the Revolution, 1900*). Bertolucci's radiant landscape was a symbol of timelessness. The world depicted by this filmmaker was mostly rural, but his was a countryside without workers, a land where crops seemed to grow by themselves. It was therefore antithetical to Antonioni's universe. *The Cry* and *The Red Desert* pictured a plain devoured by industrial wastes, marred by chimneys and derricks, overshadowed by smoke. Antonioni's plain was as flat as Bertolucci's, but its uniformity was a threat, in the fog the least unevenness became a trap.

Films shot in actual locations, and intent on respecting the characteristics of the filmed areas, offered highly contrasting interpretations of Italian landscapes. On the one hand, there was the desert, urban or industrial, a Nature ruined by modernism. On the other, there was idyllic scenery. This is seldom as obvious as in *The Leopard*. One of delights of the film was the rich visual poetry of the dusty, the earthy and the sun-burnt. Making the shimmering heat, blinding light and stifling powder of the island palpable, Visconti did not seek to explain anything. The incandescence of the day was not a painful metaphor for the immobility of Sicily, it was merely an impression that the brightness of the screen was able to translate. The delicately lit interiors were occasionally offset by explosions of sunlit radiance in outdoor scenes where the wonderful, silent palaces

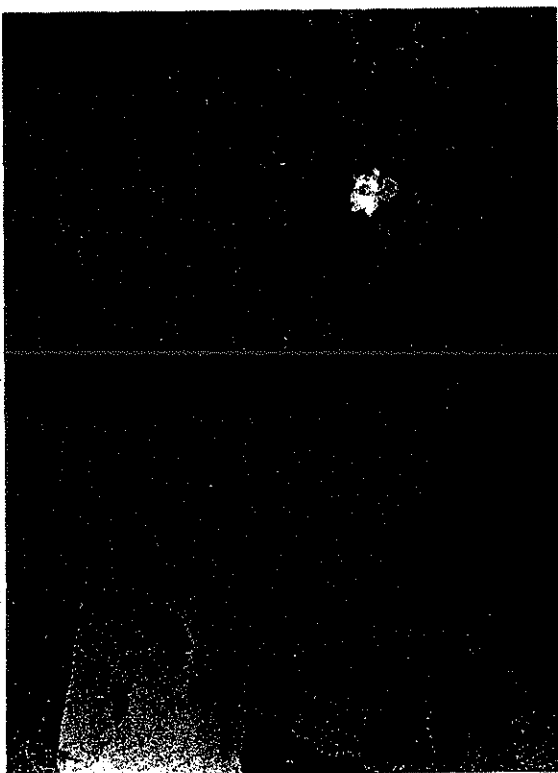


Plate 26 *The Leopard* (1963, Luchino Visconti)

were surrounded in an expanse of summer fields, or in vistas of beautiful gardens. If this film in which so little happens is rather long, it is because many shots were taken solely to celebrate, capture and enhance the beauty of nature – in other words to give pleasure. This film is one of the Italian cinema mourning glamouously the world that industry had destroyed.

I have lingered over *The Leopard* because it idealized Sicily. During their short Neorealist experience, Germi and Visconti gave a much more critical vision of southern Italy. In the 1960s, Francesco Rosi was almost the only director who continued in the same vein, which makes his works a special case. Some of his films produce the effect of documentaries. *Hands over the City* (1963) deals with speculation in housing in Naples. A building contractor, who fails to evict tenants from a district which might be a profitable housing estate, knocks down an empty building, thus causing adjoining structures to collapse. Involving bankers, industrialists, politicians, the media and even the Church, the action moves immediately from the housing estate, where demolition had already started, to the town hall where corrupt politicians are backing the contractor.

This was a courageous work but Rosi was more original in *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) where he did not draw such a crude distinction between the criminals and the victims. Giuliano, a Sicilian bandit, was killed in 1950, since he was paid by the autonomists to murder policemen and by



Plate 27 *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962, Francesco Rosi)

the landlords to murder leftist country people, there were many people who wanted him dead. Beginning with the discovery of the corpse, Rosi's film shows that it is impossible to account for the murder, since the whole structure of Sicilian rural society is more or less involved in it. Modernist film codes, taken in this regard as a sense of indecisiveness, are effectively used in this film. Many sequences are interrupted briskly, as if it were impossible to conclude them. The film emphasizes its own ambiguity by refusing to offer a clear explanation of events. Taking advantage of what was merely an incident, Rosi suggests that Sicily cannot be understood on the basis of the simple opposition between backwardness and modernization and that it is not easy to disentangle a complex system where kinship and patronage prevail over class-based relationships. His concerns were close to Germi's, but his radically different style reveals how old-fashioned Neorealism had become for the younger generation of Italian film buffs.

Italian audiences were offered many more domestic films and fewer American ones in the 1960s than in any other period in Italian film history. Their interest in film decreased slowly and steadily during that period, but that was part of a general shift towards other forms of amusement – sport, music, tourism, betting – which developed quickly as Italians had more money to spend. This was perfectly consonant with the widespread image of a sweet life. Politicians, be they Marxist or liberal, were optimistic about the effects of the 'miracle'. It was contended that most problems would be solved by modernization, with the expansion of a strong industrial sector and an affluent middle class, and by political democratization. Few people acknowledged the symptoms of social discontent apparent even in the economically active and affluent northern provinces. Collective unrest differed from that in many other European countries because it was more dispersed and easily camouflaged. For instance, the mass protest in 1968–9 had nothing to do with the French events of 1968 which were violent but short-lived. The effects of social uneasiness were felt for a long time, more than a decade in Italy. Open violence began late but it lasted longer and was more traumatic than in any neighbouring country.

It is important to stress the social context of the time, because it emphasizes the discrepancy between films and people's ongoing concerns. The mainstream cinema pictured a perfectly affluent world, even though it is true that it was extremely critical of it, but only from a moral point of view. Nobody is redeemed in *La dolce vita* and other contemporary films. Fellini's protagonist, Marcello, an uninspiring, unlovable man, is lost in an absurd world where money is the universal criterion. The final message is a lay version of Catholicism: having got too much wealth and comfort, we have lost our sense of values. Comedies, built on classical patterns, and 'modernist' films expanded upon the same themes. The evocation of beautiful old landscapes, the condemnation of ambitious women, were part of the same mourning of traditional ethical principles. However, apart from Rosi, nobody admitted that, whereas both its nature and its location had changed, poverty had not disappeared. In this respect, and whatever their aesthetic quality, films contributed to connecting the urban population with the standards of the market. The bulk of their public was a social group, the product of growing literacy, middle-class comfort and a booming entertainment industry, which was gratified to see its way of life represented on the silver screen and enjoyed the critical portrayal of the very rich given in the movies.

And yet, at a time when movies were very remote from the most urgent issues, a group of Italian filmmakers from the late-1950s to the mid-1970s took an active part in the radical changes to the codes and conventions of narrative cinema and was in the vanguard of modernist films. Although there was a plot and a few characters (however modified) in their pictures,

there was now also an 'excess' which was not justified by the unfolding of the story. Many sequences looked purposeless. This did not, however, mean that they were boring, for spectators could either ignore them, or integrate them into their personal fantasies and mental associations. Themes or subjects were not dismissed but formal elements were more or less divorced from content. In the wake of these experiments, even 'popular' genres, like Eurowesterns, indulged in the same process and offered their viewers images and sounds which they could arrange in their own minds. Film magazines and exhibitors' publicity, which stressed the sophistication of these 'quality' movies, suggested a growing distance between the typical mainstream film, based on old models, and modernist works. There was a difference, but it was not as great as critics suggested. With rare exceptions, modernist films reached a large audience in cities. They contributed to making the public familiar with a different conception of the moving image. To put it another way, they introduced them to television.