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Misery is the True Script for Comedy:

A Study of Italian Film Comedy in the 1950s

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Italian

by

Christopher Burton White

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Misery is the True Script for Comedy:
A Study of Italian Film Comedy in the 1950s

by

Christopher Burton White

Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Thomas J. Harrison, Chair

This dissertation fills a lacuna in the history of Italian cinema, formally analyzes a selection of significant film comedies from the 1950s, and challenges many of the assumptions that have been made about postwar Italian cinema. The conservative atmosphere of the fifties, the detrimental effects of censorship on Italian cinema, and the return of popular genres after the end of the widely-acclaimed neorealist period have led to assumptions about a limited engagement with contemporary Italian society in the motion pictures produced in Italy during the 1950s. While most critics and film historians view these years in Italian cinema as the disappointing aftermath of neorealism, a decade in which conservative elements in Italian society pushed national cinema in the direction of facile optimism and escapism, this dissertation demonstrates that many comedies in fact engaged with Italian society,

offering incisive critiques of contemporary Italy that pinpoint and satirize hypocrisy, inequality, and a host of other ills of the Italian republic in the 1950s. This study considers existing scholarship on Italian cinema and reevaluates films starring the popular Neapolitan actor Antonio De Curtis (Totò), Renato Castellani's *Due soldi di speranza* (*Two Cents Worth of Hope*, 1952) and other examples of *neorealismo rosa* (rosy or pink neorealism), and the movies directed by Federico Fellini featuring Alberto Sordi, both in terms of aesthetics as well as subject matter. This dissertation asserts that the thematic and stylistic innovations of these comedies directly influence the *commedia all'italiana*, the bitter comedies produced during Italy's economic boom, and the future works of renowned Italian auteurs in the 1960s.

The dissertation of Christopher Burton White is approved.

Massimo Ciavolella

Claudio Fogu

Thomas J. Harrison, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

Misery is the True Script for Comedy: A Study of Italian Film Comedy in the 1950s

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VITA/BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christopher Burton White earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Kenyon College and a Master of Arts in Italian from the Middlebury College School in Italy. He has taught various levels of Italian language and culture as a visiting instructor at Oberlin College, the University of Arizona and Ohio University. Christopher has presented papers on Italian cinema at a number of academic conferences on a wide range of topics, including the films of Mario Monicelli, Federico Fellini and Pier Paolo Pasolini. He authored an article concerning postwar film censorship in the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* and recently published a brief analysis of a scene from *Souvenir d'Italie (It Happened in Rome, 1957)* in *World Film Locations: Florence*. He has released translations of excerpts from Federico Fellini's *Fare un film (Making a Film, 1980)*, a collection of the Italian director's writings, in the journals *Inventory* and *Senses of Cinema*, and he is currently preparing a full-length version of the translation and an introduction to the volume for publication with Contra Mundum Press. His research interests include Italian cinema of the 1950s, postwar Italian history and culture, representations of urban space on film, and the *commedia all'italiana* (Italian style comedy).

Introduction

Very little attention has been paid in critical film studies to the comedies that predate the *commedia all'italiana*, due in part to a scholarly bias against popular cinema and to the elevated status of neorealism and the works of canonized auteurs in the history of Italian film. Paolo Noto explains that the reputation acquired by the motion pictures produced in Italy in the 1950s has suffered because of their location in history: “gli anni Cinquanta appaiono come quel periodo che non è più neorealismo e non è ancora quel tipo di cinema d'autore che si affermerà nel decennio successivo” (2011: 11). The films of the 1950s are often thought of as a “corrupted” form of neorealism, and “il comico e la commedia sono gli obiettivi polemici principali della critica alla corruzione del neorealismo” (15). Despite a resurgence of interest in the *commedia all'italiana* in recent years, the comedies that have played a fundamental role in shaping its bitterly comic criticism of contemporary Italy have not been investigated satisfactorily.

The conservative atmosphere of the 1950s, the detrimental effects of censorship on Italian cinema, and the return of popular genres after the end of neorealism have led to assumptions about a limited engagement with contemporary Italian society in the motion pictures produced in Italy during this period. Contrary to the belief that these factors resulted in a decade-long lull in significant social and political commentary, comic cinema in fact continued to explore issues that dramatic films often avoided after pressure from key figures in the Christian Democrat party and the Catholic Church put an end to a perceived threat from

neorealism. A number of filmmakers discovered that comedies were less likely to be targeted by the increasingly vigilant censorship committees of the Ufficio centrale di cinematografia and that Italian audiences were often more receptive to discussions of difficult topics if they were treated humorously (D'Amico 1985: 17). It was therefore “una necessità non soltanto dell'autore ma della platea” that led to “soluzioni umoristiche per poter digerire” the difficulties of the aftermath of World War II in Italian films of the late 1940s and early 1950s (Sonego 1985: 182).

In his “Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'Italiani,” Giacomo Leopardi argues that the Italian populace is uniquely “cynical,” and that as a consequence the relationship between laughter and quotidian existence assumes a peculiar character in Italy:

Gl'italiani ridono della vita: ne ridono assai di più, e con più
persuasione intima di disprezzo e freddezza che non fa niun'altra
nazione [. . .] Il popolaccio italiano è il più cinico dei popolacci.

(Leopardi 1824)

Nowhere is this tendency to “laugh about life” more clear than in postwar Italian cinema, as the trials and tribulations of the war and the difficulties of the reconstruction period are often represented comically, even in primarily dramatic neorealist films. Italian cynicism does not preclude a redemptive quality of laughter, for in the *Operette morali* Leopardi “explains the paradox that the more clearly humans see their own desolation, the more given they are to mirth. Laughing is thus a method of transcending pain, an anodyne to grief” (Harrison 505). In *L'umorismo*, Luigi Pirandello expounds on what he calls the “sentimento del contrario,” a quality

of humor that might also explain the unexpected pairings, the clashes between comedy and tragedy common in Italian cinema (1992: 50; 124-31). “According to Pirandello, humor is the ideal instrument for expressing the paradoxical nature of reality and denouncing the absurdity and pain of the human condition” (Bassanese 1997: 7). Neapolitan actor Antonio De Curtis (Totò) expressed a similar sentiment when he stated that “la miseria è il copione della vera comicità,” and his films demonstrate how misery and hardship often paradoxically become opportunities for laughter in Italy (qtd. in Faldini and Fofi 1977: 123). Italian comedies approached topics such as poverty and the housing crisis in the wake of World War II, and soon turned their attention to issues such as gender inequality and the clash between Italian provincialism and the rapid modernization of a large portion of the peninsula with the approach of the economic miracle. The Italian cynicism Leopardi identified is central to the films produced in Italy since 1945, as the disappointments of the hope for radical change after the war’s end led to increasing bitterness and frustration discernible in Italian comedies. Mordant humor became a means of identifying and coping with the difficulties of daily life and the ills of Italian society, and this form of comedy was present throughout the 1950s and later flourished in the *commedia all’italiana*.

The *commedia all’italiana* is typically restricted to the period between 1958 and 1980, with many of the most representative titles produced during the years coinciding with the economic boom, or 1958 to 1964 (Giacovelli 2002: 93). According to Enrico Giacovelli, the *commedia all’italiana* incorporates a greater degree of drama than traditional comedies, sometimes even includes realistic

depictions of death on screen, undermines the expected happy ending of conventional film comedy, and engages with and assumes a critical position toward contemporary Italian society (91-92). Masolino D'Amico observes that the plots of Italian style comedies involve comic treatments of subjects that could also be approached dramatically (1985: 40). The standard protagonist of Italian style comedy is the *italiano medio*, a "type" Peter Bondanella describes as "an inept, self-centered, shallow, yet often lovable individual, the eternal adolescent whose lack of self-awareness sometimes borders upon the grotesque" (2004: 145). The *italiano medio* is uniquely different from the classic comic hero, and therefore "La presenza come protagonista di un personaggio negativo" is a defining characteristic of the *commedia all'italiana* (Continenza 1985: 48). While traditional histories of Italian cinema associate the negative hero with the comedies of the late 1950s and 1960s, this dissertation demonstrates that protagonists with reprehensible qualities arise in the early 1950s in the films of Federico Fellini and Alberto Sordi.

This study fills a lacuna in the history of Italian cinema, formally analyzes a selection of significant film comedies from the late 1940s and 1950s, and challenges many of the assumptions that have been made about postwar Italian cinema with respect to the *commedia all'italiana*. Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, for example, claims that Italian style comedy "radically differed from its ancestors" (2008: 7), but we shall see that the primary characteristics of the *commedia all'italiana* are already present by the mid-1950s. Many scholars overemphasize a division between the comic cinema of the postwar period and the films of the economic boom. This is especially true for those starring Antonio De Curtis, an actor whose contribution to the

evolution of Italian film comedy is frequently overlooked because of his association with farcical, traditional comedy. While Jacqueline Reich links a number of pink neorealist titles to the *commedia all'italiana*, she relegates Totò to the realm of pure “*film comico*” in direct opposition to it (2004: 15), and Giacomo Boitani dismisses Totò as a “slapstick [comedian]” in his article concerning the relationship between neorealism and Alberto Sordi (2011: 49). Yet, Totò’s unique form of humor based on misery and the manner in which he confronts hardship through laughter in a number of motion pictures from the late 1940s and early 1950s determine the future course of Italian comic cinema.

The first section of this dissertation centers on a series of groundbreaking films directed by Steno and Mario Monicelli in which Totò adeptly blends tragedy and comedy and helps push Italian comic cinema in the direction of the *commedia all'italiana*. This chapter examines the origins of the Totò character and explains how tragedy, poverty and hunger formed an important part of his peculiar brand comedy both on stage and in his early film career. Despite his reputation for slapstick, Totò breaks with the conventions of the “white telephone” period in his first feature-length film, *Fermo con le mani* (Gero Zambuto, 1937), by denouncing class difference and satirizing Mussolini, thus foreshadowing the social criticism at the heart of the Steno and Monicelli films of the 1950s that bear on the future of Italian comedy.¹ These so-called “neorealist comedies” tackle serious topics such as unemployment and the housing crisis and criticize the postwar administration and

¹ “La sigla critica che per lungo tempo ha sintetizzato il carattere del cinema italiano degli anni trenta è stata quella di cinema “bianco”; [. . .] un cinema prevalentemente rinchiuso in *interni* inaccessibili al reale nella sua dimensione quotidiana e popolare” (Grande 2003: 18).

the Catholic Church for their inadequate response to the nation's plight in the years following World War II. In *Guardie e ladri* (1951), *Totò e i re di Roma* (1952) and *Totò e Carolina* (1955), the Neapolitan actor abandons the often surreal, farcical mask of the *avanspettacolo*, the brief routines performed on stage between film screenings common in Italian theaters from the 1930s to the 1950s, for a more human character better suited to representing the *uomo della strada*, the precursor to the *italiano medio* of the *commedia all'italiana*.

The second chapter of this study reevaluates *neorealismo rosa*, one of the most frequently criticized categories of motion pictures in the history of Italian cinema. A close analysis of Renato Castellani's *Due soldi di speranza* (1952), the film typically considered the first pink neorealist title, debunks a number of assumptions about the cinema of the 1950s and demonstrates how Castellani satirizes the backwardness of Southern Italian sexual and social mores and draws attention to the lack of opportunities for employment available to those living outside of the nation's urban centers. This section examines the cinematography in the film and explains how frequent slanted shots and tight spaces convey the familial pressures and concerns about public opinion that contribute to lack of freedom afforded to young Italians living in rural areas in Southern Italy. Contrary to the belief that pink neorealism equates to quasi-realist escapism featuring voluptuous *maggiorate fisiche*, this chapter asserts that *Due soldi di speranza* blends elements of neorealism with comedy and the grotesque in a manner that foreshadows a number of iconic *commedie all'italiana*.

The second chapter also considers the relationship of Castellani's work to Luigi Comencini's *Pane, amore e fantasia* (1953) and Dino Risi's *Poveri ma belli* (1957). These subsequent pink neorealist titles are decidedly less incisive than *Due soldi di speranza* in terms of social commentary, but they also contribute to the future of Italian comedy in a variety of ways. Vittorio De Sica's role in *Pane, amore e fantasia* as the character Marshal Carotenuto evinces certain negative aspects of Italian masculinity, and the character's tremendous efforts to maintain propriety as an officer in uniform often turn satirical, offering a glimpse of De Sica's gallery of ostentatious political figures and wealthy entrepreneurs to come in the *commedia all'italiana* of the 1960s. Despite a conservative message to stick with your social class, *Poveri ma belli* demonstrates tension between an old-fashioned Italy and the changing tastes and aspirations of a new generation growing up after the end of the war. In the Risi film, daily life in the city of Rome reflects increasing economic prosperity and American cultural influence, leading to visible changes in consumption, leisure activities, and traditional gender roles shared by Italian comedies produced during the economic boom.

The third chapter of the dissertation concerns the early works of Federico Fellini and the birth of Alberto Sordi's *italiano medio* figure. Although Fellini is frequently associated with auteur cinema, autobiographical films, and visual excess, this study views *Lo sceicco bianco* (1952) and *I vitelloni* (1953) as innovative comedies of manners that look toward the *commedia all'italiana* by featuring an unprecedented degree of negativity in the main characters. *Lo sceicco bianco* launches an acerbic attack on the conservatism of the postwar period and *I vitelloni*

offers a critique of the idleness of the Italian provinces; these films provide Alberto Sordi with an opportunity to showcase the reprehensible qualities that would later become the trademark of the protagonists of Italian style comedies.

The last portion of the third chapter discusses *Il seduttore* (1954), directed by Franco Rossi, the film in which Sordi's *vitellone* type assumes the leading role and the primary characteristics of the Italian style comedy take shape. No longer a provincial loafer, the protagonist of the Rossi film is a middle-class insurance salesman living with his wife in the nation's capital. Sordi's bungling character undermines the conception of Italian men as Latin lovers and successful entrepreneurs and is revealed to be a lazy, puerile braggart taking advantage of his wife's hard work. Growing prosperity in Rome, automobile ownership and beach vacations reflect changes in Italy in the 1950s and new opportunities made available by the approaching economic boom. This chapter considers the manner in which *Il seduttore* engages with Italian society and satirizes Italian attitudes toward contentious issues such as tax evasion, divorce, and the role of the Church in the daily lives of Italian citizens, and situates the Rossi film with the *commedia all'italiana*.

The comedies of the early to mid-1950s are commonly viewed as remote from those produced in Italy after 1958. Enrico Giacovelli's statement in his volume on the *commedia all'italiana* reflects the reigning attitude toward the comic cinema produced prior to the release of Mario Monicelli's *I soliti ignoti*:

Le commedie anteriori a *I soliti ignoti* possono anche essere ricche di elementi satirici e drammatici, ma appaiono comunque impregnate di

neorealismo rosa, di cultura strapaesana: frutti ancora acerbi cresciuti
alla rinfusa, prematuramente, sotto il sole del Sud [. . .]. (1990: 12)

Contrary to the belief that these films are removed from the *commedia all'italiana*, my thesis contends that the “neorealist comedies” starring Totò, Renato Castellani’s pink neorealist *Due soldi di speranza*, and a number of early films starring Alberto Sordi already demonstrated the primary attributes ascribed to Italian comic cinema after 1958. In the analyses that follow we shall uncover the unhappy endings, the trademark blend of comic and dramatic elements, the themes of death and failure, and the shameful qualities of the *italiano medio*. This dissertation reveals that the *commedia all'italiana* proper is closely aligned with its precursors from the 1950s.

I. Totò: Misery is the True Script for Comedy

Io so a memoria la miseria, e la miseria è il copione della vera comicità. Non si può far ridere, se non si conoscono bene il dolore, la fame, il freddo, l'amore senza speranza, la disperazione della solitudine di certe squallide camerette ammobiliate, alla fine di una recita in un teatrucolo di provincia; e la vergogna dei pantaloni sfondati, il desiderio di un caffè latte, la prepotenza esosa, la cattiveria del pubblico senza educazione. Insomma non si può essere un vero attore comico senza aver fatto la guerra con la vita. (qtd. in Faldini and Fofi 1977: 123).

i. Origins

Antonio De Curtis explains that his humble origins in the Sanità quarter of Naples near the turn of the century and his experience as a struggling comic actor in the squalid venues of Rome and Naples had a significant influence on the formation of his peculiar brand of comedy. De Curtis' childhood and his early theatrical career were marked by considerable difficulties. Poverty, combined with the burden of growing up the illegitimate child of a single mother, resulted in a turbulent formative period. His experience in the First World War left an indelible mark, as did the trials and tribulations of his acting career. His first job in a dilapidated theater in Rome, Salone Elena, is emblematic in that he was never paid for his time and battled cold and hunger on his walks to and from work. The actor's subsequent rise to fame, first on stage and then years later on screen, following a serendipitous opportunity to perform at the Roman theater Sala Umberto I in 1922, largely obscures the memory of the extent of Antonio De Curtis' struggles, but in his autobiography, *Siamo uomini o caporali?*, he suggests that his sense of humor was linked to sadness and misery even from childhood, and his difficulties throughout the rest of his early life would only further reinforce it: "L'ironia e il senso

dell'umorismo facevano già parte di Antonio che però covava sempre un fondo di insicurezza e di malinconia" (Totò 1993: 22).

Vittorio Spinazzola has noted that Totò's rise to fame, that is the period in which he managed to overcome the disappointments of the beginning of his cinematographic career and achieve extraordinary success at the box office, coincides with the most important years of the neorealist season (1974: 86). During the period in which Giulio Andreotti and the Christian Democrats sought to put an end to the production of neorealist films through censorship and fiscal incentives, Totò became the key to linking neorealism's commitment to social critique to Italian comedy in the years that followed. Totò's postwar films, including the farces and parodies, almost always contain allusions to the current social and political situation which serve to highlight inequality and hypocrisy, drawing from his experience with various *riviste* during World War II in which Nazis, fascists, and even the Allies became objects of ridicule. Stefano Vanzino (Steno) and Mario Monicelli recognized his potential and initiated Totò's postwar transformation, that is his conversion from pure *maschera*, from the surrealist farces indebted to his theatrical experience and to the comics of the silent era, to more authentic, believable protagonists that represent the everyday Italian struggling to get by in a context of poverty and inequality. Gian Piero Brunetta describes the importance of Totò's postwar films as an experiment that later culminates in the Italian style comedy: "I suoi film [. . .] costituiscono la vera spina dorsale, il laboratorio di formazione e sviluppo delle caratteristiche della commedia all'italiana che raggiungerà la sua fase migliore negli anni sessanta" (2004:139).

Instead of tackling Totò and his entire body of work as a whole, this chapter focuses on the characteristics of the actor and of the films that are most relevant to pushing film comedy in the direction of the *commedia all'italiana*. A close study of a number of De Curtis films that predate *I soliti ignoti* (1958) shows that his experimentation with a mixture of tragic and comic registers, the quotidian content, and the rejection of the expected happy endings of traditional comedies laid out the essential features of the Italian style comedy well before the “official” beginning of the movement in 1958.² The humanization of the *maschera* provides a model for the protagonists of the Italian style comedy who adopt a similar approach in their portrayal of everyday Italians and their foibles during the incipient economic boom. A key factor in this transformation is Totò's encounter with the director Mario Monicelli and his commitment to social commentary through caustic satire. After Erminio Macario's brief success as a protagonist in a trilogy of comedies scripted by Steno and Monicelli that reference the events of World War II and its immediate aftermath, it became apparent that Macario's childlike wonder and optimism limited the extent to which audiences could identify with his characters; Totò would prove to be a more appropriate choice on account of his intrinsic melancholy, his skill at playing both comic and dramatic roles, and his irregular appearance (Giacovelli 2002: 57). Antonio De Curtis' penchant for social and political critique through comedy first appears on stage, and, although largely ignored by histories of Italian cinema under fascism, it is also an important part of some of his earliest films. Steno and Monicelli realize this potential as a possible solution to the crisis of neorealism

² For examples of scholars who consider *I soliti ignoti* the first *commedia all'italiana*, see Lanzoni (2008: 36-43) and Giacovelli (2002: 93-95).

and the audience's low tolerance for its pessimism; Totò's comedies become a means of balancing comedy and critique, increasing the appeal to postwar spectators while testing the sensitivity of Christian Democrat censorship. Despite the fact that comedy was a safer route to pursue, as suggested by Masolino D'Amico (1987: 17), the difficulties encountered with a number of Totò films attest to the increasing pressure on filmmakers in the fifties to avoid topics that offended the postwar establishment.

A comment by Antonio De Curtis reveals the ways in which his humor both draws from past traditions and also shares a fundamental aspect of neorealism and the *commedia all'italiana*: "In genere, l'umorismo, quale uso comporlo con i gesti del corpo e con la mimica facciale, nasce dalle mie osservazioni di tutti i giorni" (qtd. in Faldini and Fofi 1977: 141). Leaving aside the emphasis on corporeal movements, Alberto Sordi and other actors associated with the *commedia all'italiana* use similar terms when describing the inspiration behind their comic performances, frequently mentioning the observation of everyday people as the starting point for shaping the protagonists of their films.³ Despite the fact that he was often criticized during the postwar reconstruction for the surrealistic elements of his films that hark back to silent era comics and his theatrical experience, Totò also shows a kinship with neorealism and Italian style comedy in his careful observation and depiction of the peculiarities and weaknesses of lower and middle class Italians, particularly in his films from the late forties and fifties.

³ In an interview with Jean A. Gili, Alberto Sordi states that "Nei miei film mi piace descrivere personaggi che ho incontrato e attorno ai quali ho costruito un universo" (Gili 1980: 117). He echoes this statement and mentions his connection to neorealism in Pintus (1985: 191-92).

Totò's place in the history of comic cinema in Italy cannot be fully explained without mention of the influence of the silent era. The slapstick, chaos and at times even violence that often accompanies De Curtis' comic arsenal connects him to a long tradition of European and American cinematic film comedy. Gian Piero Brunetta mentions the fact that the disorder characteristic of Totò's comedies differentiates itself from many of his predecessors in that it specifically targets the value system of Italian society and reflects a complete lack of respect for everyone and everything (2009: 169-70). Totò is compared to Charlie Chaplin more often than any other film actor, especially in regard to costume, and the similarity between their disyllabic monikers (Totò and the Italian version of Chaplin, Charlot) and the indigence common to both the Neapolitan actor and Chaplin's Tramp also reveal an undeniable parallel. The producers of De Curtis' earliest films intended to exploit the similarity between the two when they first attempted to adapt Totò to the silver screen. The bowler hat and tux would have visually linked the Tramp and Totò for his first film spectators, but Antonio De Curtis has remarked that his signature costume was born out of the meager collection of props that he had at his disposal and that there was no intention to copy the appearance of the Tramp on his part:

Totò è venuto al mondo originale, non mi ha ispirato nessuno. L'unico comico che ammirassi ai miei tempi di ragazzo, si chiama De Marco, Gustavo, un macchiettista di cui oggi non si ricorda nessuno. Il frac di Totò era di mio nonno. I calzoni a mezz'asta erano di mio padre. Ero costretto a tirarli su per camminare. Il nome, Totò è il diminutivo

napoletano del mio nome, Antonio. Aggiunsi una bombetta, e fu fatta.
Non c'era alcun riferimento, alcuna ispirazione. (qtd. in Faldini and
Fofi 120)

The baggy pants that fit too tightly, the tuxedo coat that is too long, and the shoestring tie serve as a reminder of the poverty and hardship that first provided the mask with an opportunity to be born. The costume also shows an attempt to maintain an air of dignity despite his penury, in spite of all of the difficulties that the mask was devised to confront.

De Curtis' career on stage began with small roles in the variety theater and *avanspettacolo* in poor quality venues, but with growing popularity following a serendipitous opportunity to act at the Sala Umberto I in Rome, he later moved on to *riviste*, with larger groups of established actors (including Anna Magnani) providing entertainment in the nation's war-torn capital. Totò experimented with criticism of many aspects of life during and immediately following the Second World War, including Mussolini and the fascists, Hitler and the Nazis, and even the allied soldiers. These productions ran into a number of problems with censorship and therefore provide a harbinger of Steno and Monicelli's clashes with the Ufficio centrale di cinematografia, starting with *Totò cerca casa* in 1949. De Curtis' bold insistence on identifying and ridiculing unpleasant aspects of Italian society and recent history is also discernible in his early cinematographic career. Although most of Totò's first decade of films, from his debut in 1937 until the beginning of his collaboration with Monicelli and Steno in 1949, are largely farcical and show an actor torn between silent film models, the influence of variety theater, and the

marked presence of surrealist elements, they also introduce many of the themes that become characteristic of Totò in the postwar period and foreshadow the ways in which Antonio De Curtis later hones in on the shortcomings of the reconstruction.

It would be difficult to delineate all of the reasons for Totò's widespread popularity, but one explanation for his appeal that is relevant to our present purpose is the effect that his comedy aims to produce: a momentary feeling of retaliation against or liberation from the established order. Totò's films serve a purpose akin to the carnival tradition described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. Medieval and Renaissance carnival was an accepted period of freedom that provided revelers with an opportunity to shun social conventions and express themselves without inhibition. Totò's function as a kind of temporary release from the rigid moral, political and linguistic structures imposed on Italians, first by the fascists, and later by the conservatism of the Christian Democrats and the Catholic Church during postwar reconstruction, demonstrates a marked affinity to the carnivalesque. According to Valentina Ruffin,

il suo personaggio si farà portatore del disordine, si adopererà a contrastare, ora con la parola, ora con il gesto, le più elementari convenzioni sociali, le leggi dell'educazione, del pudore, dell'autorità.
(1996: 337)

Totò's characters often refuse to submit to the will of magistrates, politicians, teachers, or anyone else who claims to be superior in terms of status, education, wealth, or influence. Language is one of the primary tools with which Totò overturns accepted norms. He transcends simple plays on words to undermine any

attempt to maintain a universally understood, standardized Italian.

Misunderstanding is created through the use of foreign locutions, regional difference, peculiar coinages, and a wide range of registers specific to a certain social class or profession. Totò often targets the complex syntax and diction typical of those who wield power or influence, the inflated rhetoric alien to the quotidian language of the average Italian. The deconstruction of *aulicità*, the Latinisms and abstruse terms characteristic of Italian literary tradition and the bureaucracy, becomes a means through which Totò lampoons the social hierarchy and the pedants who use *aulicismi* to assert their supremacy or impress their colleagues. The words and actions of the mask thus become a liberating experience for the audience, an escape from oppressive societal norms and structures that are at variance with the everyday experience of many Italians.

A fundamental aspect of Totò's philosophy and his need to rebel against a seemingly unspecified enemy is his separation of mankind into two distinct categories: *uomini* and *caporali*. This division can be used to explain the intrinsic recalcitrance of the mask present from the start of his film career. In his autobiography, De Curtis explains that his conception of the *caporale* is based on a particularly arrogant superior officer, a corporal under whom the young De Curtis served during the First World War, a man who abused his position and came to represent the nefariousness of those who use power to denigrate those over whom they hold sway (1993: 19-21). As stated by the actor, the Totò persona cannot resist provoking and ridiculing *caporali*: "Quando mi imbatto in un caporale, non resisto, lo devo mettere alla berlina" (1993: 68). The mischievousness of Totò is therefore

aimed at these sorts of characters, his rebellion is directed at them, and the antagonists of his films are those who embody his definition of *caporale*. This distinction is the basis for the eponymous film that De Curtis wrote while part of his own film production company. Not only essential to the films of Antonio De Curtis, similar categories will later be echoed by numerous films starring Alberto Sordi, including *Un eroe dei nostri tempi* (1955) and *Il vigile* (1960), in which Sordi's protagonists decide that it is better to be the one giving orders and dealing blows than to be the one receiving them.

In some of Totò's earliest motion pictures, the surreal, macabre and sometimes disturbing elements are often more pronounced than they will be in the postwar period. The need to abandon this aspect of the mask became imperative as Totò was chosen by Steno and Monicelli to represent "l'uomo della strada" after Erminio Macario demonstrated his limitations in his postwar trilogy. The grim, grotesque characteristics of early Totò arguably serve as a hidden critique of society and politics; certain aspects of his early films can be read as a reaction to fascism and its emphasis on violence. The "cadavere vivente," as Alberto Anile classifies Totò from the late thirties and early forties, may be a means of obliquely attacking fascism, and the ghastly mask is therefore a sort of metaphorical incarnation or product of the ills of fascism. Censorship played a key role in limiting the extent to which De Curtis could directly reference Italian society in his early films, but *Fermo con le mani* as well as *Animali pazzi* contain a number of moments in which the regime and characteristics associated with it become objects of ridicule. Totò's films of the fifties incorporate less of the ghostly and disquieting elements of his persona,

but Monicelli will occasionally permit a sinister quality to surface in the future, for example in the darkly comic funeral procession in *Totò e i re di Roma*.

ii. Totò on Screen: *Fermo con le mani* (1937)

Fermo con le mani, Totò's cinematographic debut, is the film most clearly indebted to Charlie Chaplin's influence. The producer, Gustavo Lombardo, in fact had Chaplin in mind when he initially decided to fund the film (Bìspuri 2000: 77), but Hollywood comedies and white telephone films also had a considerable impact on the film's style and thematic content. For this reason, early Totò on film was frequently dismissed as an inferior imitation of the Tramp, and Gino Visentini's denigrating definition of the actor as a "Charlot per i poveri" is emblematic in this respect (qtd. in Caldiron 2001: 64). *Fermo con le mani* is a highly significant experiment for De Curtis in that many of the characteristic elements associated with Totò films as a whole make their appearance for the first time on screen. *Fermo con le mani* also demonstrates that social and political critique are present from the outset of his cinematographic career. The film shares an affinity with Mario Camerini's commentary on the rapaciousness and pettiness of the upper classes in comedies such as *Darò un milione* (1935), but Totò's audacious mockery of a fascist official who bears a striking resemblance to Mussolini in *Fermo con le mani* proves the uniquely subversive nature of the Neapolitan actor and sets his work apart from other comedies produced under fascism.

Torretota, a vagabond, lives in an abandoned building and manages to survive by stealing food from a seaside restaurant. When he runs into a young girl being mistreated by an abusive fugitive Nicola, he comes to her rescue and decides to take her with him. He attempts to find stable employment to provide for them both, initially by working in a day spa. After an entertaining sequence in which he dresses as a woman in order to be able to give an attractive singer, Eva, a massage, Totò's ruse is discovered by Eva's fiancée Girolamo. Eva, irritated by the fact that the man courting her did not defend her honor by lashing out at Totò, criticizes Girolamo for his cowardice. Girolamo then attempts to get back into Eva's good graces by paying Totò to provide a public display in which he will regain his honor by slapping Totò in front of Eva. A series of humorous situations follow: Totò ends up taking a job as a custodian at a music hall and finds himself directing the orchestra for a *rivista* after Eva offends the Maestro, the Maestro attacks Totò after the show out of jealousy, and their fight results in a trip to police headquarters where Totò discovers that he is the last remaining heir of a wealthy family.

The first two scenes of the film establish many of the fundamental features of the mask that will pervade Totò's cinematographic career. The opening sequence in which Totò gets ready to start the day reveals his squalor and an underlying dignity reflected in his preoccupation with presenting himself as best he can in spite of the limited means at his disposal. First he uses a makeshift shower that consists of Chianti bottles rigged to pour water through a colander, then sharpens his razor on the heel of a boot and proceeds to shave with a shard of glass as a mirror. His resourcefulness and destitution are demonstrated once again when it is revealed

that he is currently living in an abandoned building being prepared for demolition. When a wrecking ball crashes through one of the walls, Totò meets the owner of the premises. Their exchange is characteristic of the way in which Totò typically deals with authority figures. When the proprietor reveals his identity as the owner of the premises, Totò's attitude abruptly shifts to derision: "Siete voi il padrone di casa? Siete una bella carogna!" The first scene also makes use of his clever play on words when the owner criticizes him for inhabiting the space without asking for permission:

PROPRIETOR. Vi siete insediato qui senza neanche chiedere il permesso.

TOTÒ. Che insediare, insediare, non cominciare a cambiare le carte in tavola . . . qui sedie non ci sono!

Totò's retort both mocks the owner of the building and emphasizes his own poor living conditions. Much like the force of the wrecking ball that breaks through the apartment wall, Totò's mask erupts on screen in the first sequence of *Fermo con le mani* to challenge the pretensions of the first authority figure he encounters, a characteristic of Totò that persists in his antagonistic relationship with the mayor of Rome in his first project with Steno and Monicelli, *Totò cerca casa*.

The second scene of *Fermo con le mani* contains one of the most memorable comic moments of the film: a sight gag in which Totò's clever tricks and petty thievery come to the fore. A shot of Totò from behind perched on the edge of a rocky cliff with the sea in the background initially gives the impression that he is fishing, but a camera tilt down the fishing line reveals that he is using the fishhook to steal

something to eat from the table of an oceanfront restaurant below. The visual incongruity and the absurdity of Totò's "fishing" expedition are humorous, yet a degree of discomfort sets in when the restaurant staff makes it known that he has been pilfering food regularly and it becomes clear that he is constrained to do so out of penury. Fernando Esposito will in fact use the same kind of trick in *Guardie e ladri* to steal salami to feed his family. Living by expedients is a defining characteristic of Totò's films with Steno and Monicelli; *l'arte di arrangiarsi* becomes an important component of Italian film comedy during the postwar period, both for Totò and for the emerging protagonists of the nascent *commedia all'italiana*.⁴

The opening scene depicting Totò's humble abode is juxtaposed with a cut to an environment typical of the white telephone films produced in Italy during the 1930s. The peeling walls and empty space of the building under demolition are strikingly different from the lavish interior of Eva's residence shown while she takes a music lesson; the *mise-en-scène* introduces a social class and an opulent lifestyle alien to our protagonist. Ornate tapestries line the walls, vases of flowers and curiously shaped sculptures adorn the rooms, and fashionable furniture fills the living spaces. The costumes also contribute to the contrast, as Eva's opulent fur-lined dress and the Maestro's tailored pin-stripe suit, pocket square, tie pin and carnation clash with Totò's oversized, threadbare tux jacket, poorly fitting pants and short striped socks.

The disparity between the ways of life of the rich and poor is further emphasized through forms of dwellings when Totò and his friend Vincenzo

⁴ E.g., Alberto Sordi (Cencio) in Luigi Zampa's *Ladro lui, ladra lei* (1958); Vittorio Gassman (Gerardo Latini) in Dino Risi's *Il mattatore* (1960).

comment on the beauty of a luxurious gated villa as they walk by. In the scene that follows, the location is contrasted with a landscape strewn with concrete tubes in which a young orphan Totò encounters is constrained to live out of necessity. The importance placed on housing as indicators of class difference in *Fermo con le mani* hints at an unequal distribution of wealth in fascist Italy and also foreshadows Steno and Monicelli's experiment with Totò in their discussion of the postwar housing crisis in *Totò cerca casa* in 1949.

Certain aspects of the design of Eva's apartment stand out against the stock atmosphere of luxurious residences reconstructed in the studios and frequently recycled in white telephone films. The geometric patterns on the maid's hat and apron as well as the art and layout of the apartment show a decidedly futurist inspiration suggesting a specificity of time and place that is unusual for Italian comic cinema of the 1930s. The comedies produced under fascism are often set in either unspecified or foreign cities in order to avoid problems with censorship and obscure direct links with Italian societal structure or political situation. Camerini's *Darò un milione*, for example, is set in France, and the films of the similar *commedia ungherese* are situated in eastern Europe. The mise-en-scène of Eva's residence is more evocative than other contemporaneous comedies and allows for Totò and *Fermo con le mani's* light social critique to be applied to an Italian situation.

In addition to housing and costumes, the film contains a number of other allusions to class difference and denounces the frivolity of the wealthy. The content of the song Eva sings during the first scene in which she appears pertains to love ("baciami, stringimi"), as befits a traditional comedy in which a romantic interest

drives much of the plot. Yet, throughout the course of the film Eva's shallowness and preoccupation with wealth and status preclude the possibility of the expected marriage at the end of the film. Eva's callousness is evinced by her insult to Girolamo's status when a waiter addresses him as "cavaliere" in the night club:

I camerieri fanno sempre così: quando un cliente è appena appena una persona importante, lo chiamano commendatore. E quando non è niente, lo chiamano cavaliere.

In a subsequent discussion with her music teacher, the Maestro, she defines her boyfriend Girolamo as "ricco e stupido" and belittles the Maestro as "povero e cretino." The film implies that Eva's relationship with the Maestro is not strictly professional, and she reveals that her relationships are ultimately based on the best financial situation. Eva is not the only negative upper-class character in the film, for none of the wealthy is portrayed positively. The Maestro is irascible and jealous, and Girolamo is gullible, corpulent and conceited. While the upper classes are shown to be preoccupied with money, public appearance, and love interests, Totò and the orphan he seeks to provide for struggle to find the basic necessities of food and housing. Their frank dialogue frequently reflects these concerns and can be synthesized in Totò's question to his friend Vincenzo: "Ma insomma da mangiare ce l'hai o non ce l'hai?"

Fermo con le mani contains a noteworthy scene that pokes fun at an unidentified man whose visible features readily connect him to Mussolini and Italian fascism. Totò, temporarily employed at a day spa, is ordered to provide prompt service for an important client. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of the back

of a bald, sweaty head, and then zooms out to a medium shot of a man in a black suit seated in a salon chair. Upon removing the man's shoes, Totò is overtaken by the repugnant odor of his feet and comically opens a window in order to dissipate the offensive smell. The stench proves to be so repellent that Totò must ultimately use a gas mask in order to perform a pedicure. Alberto Anile justifiably marvels at the fact that such obvious ridicule of the Duce passed unnoticed by the fascist censors, given the outrage over *Il cappello a tre punte* directed by Mario Camerini (1997: 54-55). Here comedy is used to great effect to steer clear of the wrath of the Direzione generale per la cinematografia just a few years after censorship became more vigilant with the introduction of the practice of pre-approval of film scripts.⁵ The lesson that controversial issues included in comic films might pass by government censorship unscathed would prove useful to De Curtis both before and after World War II. The easily identifiable caricature of Mussolini and Totò's reaction to the odious smell of the client's feet provide an oblique reference to the abhorrence of the regime during a period in which comedies rarely took place on national soil and demonstrates the way in which forms of social or political criticism could make their way into farcical situations.

If, as Alberto Anile affirms, an element of gloom is missing because the model for Totò's protagonist in *Fermo con le mani* is Chaplin (1997: 24), the poverty and the resourcefulness required to survive in spite of it are present from the beginning of his cinematographic oeuvre. The film ends with an arbitrary happy ending typical of the "commedia brillante" in which Torretota inherits a large sum of money and

⁵ Pre-approval of scripts became necessary in 1934, the year in which the Direzione Generale was created.

drives off with the orphan girl in a luxurious car, thus dampening the impact of *Fermo con le mani*'s frequent allusions to social inequality or hunger. Yet, much like the films of Comencini and Alessandro Blasetti of the fascist era, facile endings do not entirely eliminate the possibility of making audiences aware of certain issues or preclude opportunities for the interpretation of "resistant or oppositional positions to the fascist mainstream" as suggested by Stephen Ricci (2008: 17). The negative reference to the Duce and the faint atmospheric references to an Italian cultural context make the film peculiarly subversive for the time period, and the failure of a positive conclusion to Eva's love triangle with Girolamo and the Maestro does little to redeem the fatuous wealthy characters in the end. *Fermo con le mani* does not contain the sort of bitter indictment of Italian society found in De Curtis' postwar films like *Guardie e ladri* and *Totò e Carolina*, but it does begin to push against the conventions of white telephone films and demonstrate that a small but significant amount of comedy based on current social and political issues is present from the outset of Antonio De Curtis' film career. Totò's earliest experiences on film, the landmark scene that depicts a fascist official resembling Mussolini in particular, constitute the first evidence of his fundamental role in expanding the limits of acceptable subjects for comic attack. Totò's earliest cinematographic experience demonstrates that politics and class difference form a part of his work from the outset. The next step forward in Italian comedy would require a more human protagonist that could better represent the experiences of everyday Italians struggling to get by during the aftermath of the war.

iii. Comic Neorealism: *Totò cerca casa* (1949)

1949 is a crucial year for Totò, a turning point that includes two films that demonstrate his talent for dramatic material and pathos and a shift toward themes consonant with neorealist preoccupations. 1949 marks De Curtis' first film directed by Monicelli and Steno, *Totò cerca casa*, as well as *Yvonne la nuit* by Giuseppe Amato, a film that Goffredo Fofi views as a harbinger of Totò's more serious, less farcical roles in the fifties: "La vena malinconica [. . .] già preparava il terreno all'evoluzione del personaggio in direzione neorealista" (1977: 107). Totò's minor role as Nino, the struggling vaudeville actor hopelessly in love with the dancer Yvonne, tests De Curtis' histrionic capabilities in a motion picture that combines variety theater routines with melodrama. The sequence in which Nino (Totò) announces to Yvonne that he is departing to fight in the First World War provides a glimpse of the effective blend of comic and dramatic registers that attests to De Curtis' versatility when provided the opportunity and coincides with the efforts of Steno and Monicelli to humanize the mask.

Following the liberation of Italy, neorealist films were not the only works to reflect the dire aftermath of World War II and the desperate need for change. According to Vittorio Spinazzola, the forced optimism of the comedies of the fascist era and their incongruity with the nation's recent trauma were no longer appropriate and therefore even commercial filmmakers felt compelled to convey a sense of the gravity of the postwar situation: "occorrevano quadri a tinte forti, non disegni all'acquerello" (1974: 84). Monicelli and Steno took part in some of the

earliest attempts to mediate neorealism and farcical comedy in their work as screenwriters on the trilogy starring Erminio Macario and directed by Carlo Borghesio consisting of *Come persi la guerra* (1947), *L'eroe della strada* (1948), and *Come scopersi l'America* (1949). The Macario trilogy features protagonists from the popular classes, location shooting, issues such as poverty and the black market, and serves as an important harbinger of the future of Italian comedy. *Come persi la guerra* and *L'eroe della strada* were enormously popular at the time of release, but Macario's dominance of postwar Italian comedy did not last long.⁶ Macario demonstrated certain limitations in accurately representing the average Italian struggling to get by; his joviality, childlike innocence, and, as stated by Enrico Giacovelli, physical appearance dulled the impact of the trilogy's attempt at social critique: "I problemi sociali in un certo senso vi scivolano via, non riescono a soffermarsi su quel viso rotondo e infantile: avranno bisogno, per fissarsi, delle fisionomie irregolari e meridionali di un Totò o un Sordi" (2002: 57).

Totò proved to be a more appropriate "uomo della strada" when Monicelli and Steno moved on to directing in 1949 and initiated the process of humanizing the theatrical mask. Throughout the forties and fifties, De Curtis continued to produce a large number of films loosely structured around his popular variety theater routines, often made on low budgets, shot with a relatively stationary camera in studio environments, and typified by the style of Mario Mattoli. Monicelli and Steno made a concerted effort to depart from the traditional Totò formula:

⁶ *Come persi la guerra* was the highest grossing film of 1947 and *L'eroe della strada* was third in the rankings of 1948. *Come scopersi l'America* was not among the top ten films of 1949. See Celli and Cottino-Jones (171-72).

Steno e io fummo i primi a lavorare sull'umanizzazione della figura di Totò. Partendo dalla farsa, cominciammo a dare uno spessore psicologico ai suoi personaggi, costruimmo via via delle storie che lo costringevano a svestire i panni della maschera e impersonare uomini credibili [. . .] Avevamo trasformato Totò nell'uomo della strada. Più proletario che piccolo-borghese, rappresentava quel popolino di affamati, poveracci, se non disoccupati sfruttati, semplici e anche un po' qualunque che si riconobbe nei suoi affanni quotidiani.

(Mondadori 2005: 83)

Totò's increasingly human protagonists in Monicelli films blend drama and pathos with comedy, demonstrating an emotional range more appropriate to the weighty issues they confront. The cinematographic style also shifts to accommodate the verisimilitude of Totò's characters: the camera becomes increasingly mobile and the locations reflect the living conditions of working-class protagonists. The humanization of Totò does not mean that De Curtis's collaborations with Monicelli efface his past experience. On the contrary, many of Totò characteristic themes and attributes, including visible poverty, exploitation of the *arte d'arrangiarsi*, and an inclination toward the macabre and the funereal not only appear in Monicelli films but also serve as a model for other comic films in the 1950s and the future *commedia all'italiana*.⁷

With the exception of the opening and closing sequences, *Totò cerca casa* follows the stylistic conventions of Mario Mattoli's films: a fixed camera treats the

⁷ Alberto Anile discusses the sinister, at times even disturbing aspects of early Totò in *Il cinema di Totò (1930-1945): L'estro funambolo e l'ameno spettro* (1997).

indoor studio environments like a theatrical stage, the film's structure is based on a series of skits dominated by Totò's antics, and a playful, cartoonish soundtrack lightens the atmosphere of the production. Despite the considerable stylistic differences between *Totò cerca casa* and subsequent collaborations with Monicelli, the film's focus on contemporary social issues and the hint at an unsuccessful reconstruction effort introduces themes and techniques that become central to *Guardie e ladri*. With *Totò cerca casa*, Steno and Monicelli pair the typical Totò farce with a more socially relevant topic: postwar destitution and the difficulty in finding affordable housing, problems that reappear and are elaborated upon in *Guardie e ladri*, *Totò e Carolina*, and *I soliti ignoti*.

The first scene in *Totò cerca casa* is the one most closely tied to a neorealist aesthetic. The film opens with a pan across a section of Rome that conveys the immensity of the city and the nature of its expansion. The space is cluttered with high-rises and the camera avoids the inclusion of readily identifiable monuments in the skyline. The pan provides a brief glimpse at Rome's urban sprawl and suggests the history of the city's development, offering a prelude to *Guardie e ladri's* meditation on peripheral Rome. The establishing shot is followed by documentary-style footage filmed on the streets of Rome and a voice-over that recall the emulation of news reporting or the actual splicing of such footage into neorealist films. The context in which the housing shortage is presented, that is among a number of more trivial, comical issues such as getting to work on time or keeping one's balance while on roller skates, makes the film's polemic less overt and may have been utilized to evade the recently reestablished Christian Democrat-led

ensorship committees. Yet, the narrator describes the housing issue as “il problema dei problemi” and juxtaposes a shot of a sumptuous villa, “il sogno di tutti,” with a massive wall of anonymous housing units labeled with the unflattering term “alveari umani.” The mise-en-scène in the shot of the apartment building displays rows of windows of a multitude of small apartments in the complex without showing either the top or bottom of the building in order to emphasize the number of families crammed into small, uninviting living spaces. The mise-en-scène of the villa on top of a hill includes an expansive and carefully landscaped lawn, therefore conveying a sense of property and wealth. The two shots indicate the dichotomy between rich and poor, the alienation of the lower classes in the housing projects in the city’s periphery and the posh residences of the affluent.

The damage to the city of Rome caused by World War II exacerbated a pre-existing housing shortage that began soon after the unification of Italy. The reorganization of Rome under fascism and the construction of shoddy housing projects far outside of the city center that lacked basic amenities such as heating and running water did little to improve the situation. The destruction caused by the Allied bombings left thousands homeless after the war and the displaced sought shelter wherever they could. As late as 1952, “93,054 people were still living in shacks, caves, cellars, etc.” and “another 9,701 lived collectively in former barracks, schools and camps” (Ginsborg 1990: 187-88). Despite the frivolity of many of the sequences in *Totò cerca casa*, the film expresses dissatisfaction with the sluggish response of the Italian authorities to the housing problem and ties the struggle of

Totò's protagonist to that of many of Rome's inhabitants in the years following the war.

Totò's character in the film, Beniamino Lomacchio, husband and father, is unable to find legitimate housing for his family despite the fact that he is employed as a low level municipal bureaucrat in the registry office for birth certificates. Totò, as patriarch of the Lomacchio family and white-collar worker, is a more credible protagonist than that of many films from earlier in the decade and his situation is readily identifiable to postwar spectators. He and his wife, daughter, and son live in an abandoned school along with a number of other displaced families, but they encounter serious problems when the janitor informs them that the educational institution is reopening. The film contains a considerable amount of pure farce, though certain Totò gags take on a new significance when paired with the immediacy of the housing problem and the strained circumstances of the Lomacchio family. At one point Beniamino attempts to cover his tracks after stealing an egg from the school janitor's chicken by pretending to lay an egg himself; the outlandish comic moment in fact ties Lomacchio's attempt to steal to providing bare necessities for his wife and children and links him to the profession of Ferdinando Esposito as petty thief (aptly dubbed *rubagalline* in Romanesco) in *Guardie e ladri*. In both films, the protagonists are concerned primarily with fulfilling basic needs for survival. Mr. Lomacchio is pleased to accept a piece or two of salami instead of the *lire* required

for filing for a birth certificate, as even food is hard to come by for a family that cannot find adequate housing on a municipal salary.⁸

Vittorio Spinazzola observes that Monicelli's primary target in the series of postwar films starring Totò is the rigidity of the Italian legal and bureaucratic system: "L'obiettivo contro cui Monicelli dava battaglia aveva dunque un nome preciso: era il formalismo legalitario e burocratico, incapace di tener conto dei casi concreti, dei sentimenti vivi degli uomini" (1974: 206). *Totò cerca casa's* attack on the tendency to privilege arbitrary established procedures and superfluous rigmarole over human problems is not as blatant as that of the Monicelli films to come, but the bureaucracy is ridiculed at various points nonetheless.

The sequence in the registry, with Totò's character standing behind the window dealing with a long line of Italians attempting to file various forms, shows Lomacchio relishing in his ability to bark orders at those in the cue. The excessive formality of Lomacchio's dialogue, including a humorous barrage of formal imperatives, draws attention to Totò's signature use of *aulicismi* and conflicts with the language Lomacchio uses at home with his family. Bureaucracy is later parodied in a fashion similar to that of industrialization in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). In the Chaplin film, Charlie becomes an automaton after working at the assembly line, effectively criticizing the dehumanization of the factory workers. When Beniamino is instructed to file the paperwork for employment and housing for a relative of his boss in the registry, he decides to write his name on the documents as he takes them

⁸ Interestingly, De Sica's neorealist film *Umberto D* (1952) targets the inadequacy of municipal pensions three years later, further reinforcing the correlation between *Totò cerca casa's* preoccupations and those of neorealist films.

to the room in which a number of white-collar workers monotonously stamp paperwork at a frenetic pace. Mr. Lomacchio takes part in the stamping and begins to mark everything that he sees, including the rear end of the mayor's suit as Mr. Lomacchio passes him in the hallway. Here Monicelli denounces the mindlessness of low-level bureaucratic positions and demonstrates how Mr. Lomacchio's life is unsatisfying both at work and at home.

Totò cerca casa introduces the frequent appearance of gambling in Monicelli films and also foreshadows the *commedia all'italiana's* criticism of a preoccupation with consumer goods that will later accompany the economic miracle. Lomacchio's wife and daughter repeatedly attempt to win sweepstakes by purchasing various products such as name brand coffee and *aperitivi*, and in fact they end up winning a million *lire* with which they pay for the down payment on an apartment rental. The protagonist in *Totò e i re di Roma* aims to acquire winning lottery numbers to support his wife and family after losing his job, and an old woman in *Totò e Carolina* is obsessed with the lotto to the point that she randomly assigns numbers to everything she can. In the absence of opportunity for an improvement in their living situation, the disillusioned poor place their hope in the unlikely returns of gambling. The Lomacchio family spends money they do not have on goods they are convinced will improve their lot in life. Although the economic boom is years away, *Totò cerca casa* evinces an early faith in the rewards of purchasing consumer goods that will later become an obsession for the protagonists of Italian style comedies.

In addition to Beniamino Lomacchio's theft of an egg from the janitor or the salami from the man at the birth certificate office, the film includes a group of

disreputable thieves whose means of survival is similar to that of Totò's character in *Guardie e ladri*. The three swindlers rent the apartment to the Lomacchio family along with a number of other foreign victims by making copies of keys to a luxury flat, an action that calls to mind the phony coin trick employed by Ferdinando Esposito in the opening sequence of *Guardie e ladri*. Unfortunately this is how many manage to get by when jobs and housing are scarce. Chicanery and thievery link Totò both to the comic fishing trick in his first feature-length film, *Fermo con le mani*, and to a common aspect of neorealism evinced by the prevalence of the black market and the livelihood of the *scugnizzi* in films like *Paisà* (1946) and *Sciuscià* (1946). The comedies of the 1950s witness a similar reliance on the *arte d'arrangiarsi* that connects Totò to the tradition of petty thievery and the loftier ambitions and bigger heists that frequently result in failure in the motion pictures produced toward the end of the decade.

The penultimate scene is a pivotal moment in the film that deflates the Christian Democrat's pretensions to substantial improvements during the nation's postwar reconstruction and hints of the cynicism of the nascent *commedia all'italiana*. The mayor of Rome delivers a bombastic speech for the unveiling of a statue downtown, a symbol of rebirth in the aftermath of the war, as Mr. Lomacchio rapidly approaches in a car with brakes that have been rigged with a bomb:

Cittadini! Questo monumento che ora noi scopriremo, opera egregia di un illustre artista, raffigura il nostro paese che risorge dalle macerie . . . ecco la sintesi della ricostruzione!

The statue is a classical Roman-style human figure with a pick axe in hand, a clear indication of the attempt to rebuild after World War II laid waste to the nation. Just as the mayor pulls the veil off of the statue, Lomacchio crashes into it and destroys it, undermining the mayor's feeble attempt at raising the morale of the Roman populace and suggesting the hollowness of the nation's claims of significant progress or change after the war's end.

Monicelli and Totò's denouncement of injustice, corruption, and the rigidity of the legal and bureaucratic system becomes more fervent in future projects, but *Totò cerca casa* first demonstrated that it is possible to deliver a clear statement on pressing issues such as the housing problem and need in a farcical context. In 1949, Italy was still years away from the palpable benefits of American investment in industries and the establishment of the European Economic Community that would contribute to the economic boom. *Totò cerca casa* gave voice to the discontent of the nation's citizens, many of whom were still homeless and destitute, frustrated by the sluggish response of Italian institutions to their misery.

The lack of a happy ending, or even a satisfying conclusion in this Totò farce, differentiates the film from contemporaneous comedies and indicates the course of the future *commedia all'italiana*. Cheated out of the money that they serendipitously win in the sweepstakes by the con men and branded insane after the destruction of the statue, Beniamino Lomacchio and his family end up living in a mental institution and therefore do not solve their housing problem or improve their situation in any way. Monicelli avoids the unrealistic, arbitrary endings common to Totò's fascist-era films and the revival of *commedia brillante* formulas in pink neorealist works,

motion pictures in which wealth or marriage put a swift end to the audience's worries about the future of the protagonists. The spectator is left to wonder what might happen to the Lomacchio family and to question the efficacy of the nation's attempt to rebuild after the war's conclusion. In the end, the film provides a call to action without proselytizing, much like in neorealist films, albeit within a context that is less overtly social or political and that exploits Totò's outlandish comedy to sweeten the bitter pill. Lomacchio's repeated rallying-call succinctly represents this dual nature of *Totò cerca casa*: "Sfollati del mondo, uniamoci!" Lomacchio's motto is humorous in that it parodies the sort of language employed by the left but it also implicates them along with the Christian Democrat administration for their role in postwar Italy's shortcomings and clearly suggests a stake in the nation's future and the urgent need for some form of corrective action.

iv. *Guardie e ladri* (1951) and the Failure of Postwar Reconstruction

Guardie e ladri, made two years after *Totò cerca casa* and directed once again by Steno and Monicelli, is the film in which variety theater and pre-World War II comedy veterans Totò and Aldo Fabrizi take on roles that are considerably different from the protagonists of comic films of the previous decade in a project that continues to develop the relationship between comedy and the social criticism of neorealism. In a review of the film published in *Bianco e nero*, Nino Ghelli identifies the novelty of character depth for Totò and Fabrizi in *Guardie e ladri*, a film that fully explores their histrionic capabilities and demonstrates "... come sia possibile

l'impiego di comici celebri distaccati dai loro abituali 'cliches' macchiettistici, per assurgere al ruolo di personaggi" (1952: 88). According to Gian Piero Brunetta, "*Guardie e ladri* è un film dove si può già riconoscere l'imprinting della più matura e complessa commedia degli anni sessanta" (1982: 292-93). The increasingly discernible cynicism of the screenplay, the grim depiction of Rome's peripheral neighborhoods, and the novel dramatic range of the lead actors contribute to surpassing the lighthearted, cartoonish aspects of old-fashioned farces to arrive at a novel form of comedy that hones in on the nation's shortcomings without compromise. In *Guardie e ladri*, the human qualities of the protagonists and the difficulties that Totò and Fabrizi's characters face advance the manner and tone in which the foibles and problems of everyday Italians will be faithfully documented in the Italian style comedy at the advent of the economic boom.

In *Guardie e ladri*, Ferdinando Esposito (Totò) and an accomplice trick an American at the Roman Forum by selling a counterfeit antique sesterce. In a subsequent swindle, Ferdinando and his colleague enlist a group of street urchins in order to pose as large families at a charity event for the distribution of free sacks of grain. The American that Esposito deceived earlier at the Roman Forum is charged with handing out the foodstuffs; he recognizes Ferdinando and orders Lorenzo Bottoni (Fabrizi), a police officer present at the affair, to follow the thief. After a car chase and pursuit on foot through Acqua Acetosa, Esposito escapes and Lorenzo is held responsible. The police commissioner explains that Officer Bottoni has three months to track down the fugitive, otherwise he will lose his job despite thirty years of service with the force. Once Lorenzo finds Ferdinando's apartment, he and his

wife and children get to know the criminal's family. What is initially a ruse to track down Ferdinando develops into a friendship, for Lorenzo and Ferdinando discover that they have much in common, and Officer Bottoni is ultimately conflicted about having to bring in Ferdinando. In the film's conclusion, Ferdinando leads himself to police headquarters accompanied by a reluctant Officer Bottoni.

Frequently referred to as a "neorealist comedy," *Guardie e ladri* shares a number of obvious similarities to neorealist films, including location shooting, pronounced attention to the lower classes, use of popular language, the conspicuous presence of children, and an austere visual presentation of the city of Rome, all of which contribute to making it the Monicelli film most consistent with the tenets of the neorealist movement. The choice to cast Aldo Fabrizi, the actor who played Don Pietro in *Roma città aperta*, and the American actor William Tubbs from the monastery episode of *Paisà*, establishes an obvious link to Roberto Rossellini's postwar films, and a line borrowed from *Miracolo a Milano* also connects *Guardie e ladri* to Vittorio De Sica.⁹ Not simply an homage to Italy's postwar cinema, Steno and Monicelli's comedy also opens a dialogue with neorealism to draw attention to a number of its shortcomings. The recurring presence of church domes, in particular the dome of Saint Peter's in the backgrounds of scenes shot in Esposito's neighborhood, recalls the conclusion of *Roma città aperta* and questions the optimism reflected in its ending. *Guardie e ladri*, with its story of recognition and understanding between two diametrically opposing categories, ultimately serves to

⁹ Officer Bottoni's comment to the taxi driver echoes Francesco Golisano's famous line from *Miracolo a Milano*: "quando si dice buon giorno bisogna significare veramente buon giorno."

challenge the validity of Manichean distinctions between cops and robbers, good and evil, licit and illicit, perpetuated by societal laws and adamantly defended by the Catholic Church and the Christian Democrats. Not unlike De Sica and Zavattini films such as *Ladri di biciclette* and *Sciuscià*, *Guardie e ladri* argues for greater solidarity and draws attention to the negative impact of the increasing polarization of postwar Italian society and the failure of the conservative establishment to acknowledge or address the needs of its impoverished and unemployed citizens. But *Guardie e ladri* also points out the weak points of neorealism, in particular namely its failure to encourage significant change after the war and its inability to reach out to popular audiences, with the exception of a few isolated successes.¹⁰

One of the most innovative elements of *Guardie e ladri* is the camerawork, expertly handled by Mario Bava, the cinematographer who would later become a well-known director of horror films. Bava's adherence to a neorealist aesthetic, with the majority of scenes shot on location in Rome, stands in stark contrast to *Totò cerca casa*'s numerous studio sets. The camera in *Guardie e ladri* investigates the neglected quarters of Rome in the aftermath of the war and the cinematography forms an essential part of the film's critique of the inadequate response of Italian institutions to the city's plight. The film charts Rome's irregular topography, focusing largely on the periphery and documenting the effects of the housing crisis on the landscape and on Rome's impoverished citizens. *Guardie e ladri* levels its most bitter accusation through the recurring image of the dome of Saint Peter's,

¹⁰ Christopher Wagstaff has argued that neorealist films fared better than a judgment based solely on box-office receipts would indicate (See Chapter 1 and the appendices), yet in Italy neorealism was more popular in urban centers among educated audiences than with popular ones in the periphery and in the countryside.

ironically situated next to the squalid *borgate* along the western edge of the city. Bava also imbues the film with symbolic elements that suggest *Guardie e ladri*'s principal themes, including a conspicuous number of shots framed to distinctively split the screen geometrically, most often buildings dividing the frame vertically, as in the corner of the Esposito family's apartment complex, but this visual motif is also frequently discernible indoors through features such as doorframes and shadows. Bava's cinematography privileges geometrical contrast and chiaroscuro effects, accentuated by costume choice, juxtaposing black and white and light and shadow to allude to the film's challenge to the validity of the Manichean divisions suggested by its title.

The first shot of *Guardie e ladri* encapsulates its grim take on the state of the nation: an establishing shot and brief pan across the Roman Forum, strewn with fragmented columns and rubble, introduces a city that has yet to fully recover from the aftermath of the war and its economic consequences. The mise-en-scène of the extreme long shot of Ferdinando and his accomplice among the ruins in the Forum with a cluttered mass of uninviting buildings in the background supports Corrado Alvaro's observation on the absence of rhetoric and history in these first few images (qtd. in Caldiron 2001:124). The shots of the Forum reject the bombast of the fascist regime and its emphasis on the monumentality of Rome and its glorious past. One of few iconic locations of the city in the film, *Guardie e ladri* also denies the romanticized conception of Rome associated with tourism at the outset, and instead turns the attention of the camera to the periphery, the squalor of the *borgate* and the lack of cohesion between the city center and its outer limits. The majority of the

film takes place in the outskirts, in areas just beginning to show the signs of new development but still largely characterized by inadequate living conditions and pervasive indigence.

The film presents the ambiguous perception of American beneficence and cultural influence on Italy in the aftermath of the war. Financial support, “Hollywood’s cultural influence, and Italian membership of NATO (after 1949) brought the country more and more firmly within an American sphere of influence” (Shiel 2006: 85). The role of Mr. Locuzzo, the American who both distributes sacks of grain for poor children but also fails to understand the contradiction in his dogged pursuit of a thief who stole from him to support his family at home, encapsulates the dichotomy.¹¹ According to Monicelli, “Quello derubato . . . incarna alla perfezione la contraddizione dell’americano: che è un salvatore e allo stesso tempo un padrone” (Mondadori 2005: 36). American cultural influence on postwar Italy is emphasized when Bottoni first returns home to his apartment; Bottoni’s son, shaped by the influx of Hollywood films after the war, is dressed up as a cowboy and the family listens to a jazz record on a gramophone. The American pasta Bottoni brings to Donata, Ferdinando’s wife, and her reaction when she states that she would not even know how to prepare it, comically references the extent of America’s cultural dominance and hints at a possible consequence: the suffocation of national culture or a rejection of life at home, not unlike Nando Moriconi’s response to the idealization of America in Steno’s 1954 film *Un americano a Roma*.

¹¹ The fictitious name of the charity organizing the event, (Comitato per i Soccorsi Urgenti ai Bambini Europei, or CPISUABE), references children directly and reinforces the motivation for Esposito’s disreputable means of getting by.

This attention to subtle changes in Italian society, the detailed documentation of popular culture, looks forward to the way in which the *commedia all'italiana* will present changes in consumption and cultural phenomena during the economic boom.

Rome's first *borgate* appeared shortly after the unification of Italy as a result of internal migration to the new capital, and these shantytowns proved to be a permanent feature spotting the edge of the city. In order to deal with the unsightly presence of these makeshift homes and house the large number of Italians displaced by the *sventramenti* that destroyed thousands of residences in the historic center, the fascist regime built the first "official" *borgate*, the shoddy popular housing projects that were placed well outside of the city proper. In *Roma: Da capitale a periferia* Franco Ferrarotti distinguishes these state-sanctioned developments from the "spontaneous" *borgate*, the illegitimate hovels fashioned from the city's debris, and the *borghetti*, small groups of rudimentary homes constructed out of bricks and sheet metal (1970: 55). *Guardie e ladri* documents the existence of the latter forms of *borgate*, an aspect of the city of Rome that surprisingly few neorealist films depict despite the association of the movement with the marginalized poor.¹² Made in 1951, *Guardie e ladri*'s Rome is precariously situated between the dire housing crisis in the wake of the war and the effects of measures taken by the postwar administration to combat the issue by facilitating new development and promoting incentives for popular housing projects (i.e., INA Casa).

¹² John David Rhodes discusses the *borgate* and neorealism briefly in *Pasolini's Rome: Stupendous, Miserable City* (2007: 13-16). The only films that Rhodes mentions featuring the "spontaneous" *borgate* are *L'amore in città* (1953) and *Il tetto* (1956), both of which were made after *Guardie e ladri*.

Guarde e ladri draws attention to the lag between the return of relative prosperity in the city center and visible improvement to the unacceptable living conditions in the periphery. The movement and activity in central Rome, shown by a high angle shot of the intersection of via del Tritone, via del Traforo, and via Crispi during the taxi chase suggests the return of business as usual in the city proper and the reestablishment of the class divisions that were temporarily suspended by the pandemonium of World War II. The cluttered mise-en-scène, with heavy traffic of cars, buses, motorcycles, and pedestrians on streets paved with *sampietrini*, is overlaid by a matrix of tram cables providing an emblematic representation of the modern city, a far cry from the rural area near Acqua Acetosa where Bottoni, the American, and the cab driver pursue Ferdinando on foot.

The comic car chase that leads to a barrier along the present day via dei Campi Sportivi provides an entertaining parody of gangster films but also serves to delineate the separation of the periphery from the center of Rome. In reference to the city in European cinema, Pierre Sorlin notes that distance of the suburbs from a city's urban core is "emphasized by necessary recourse to means of transport" (1991: 114). Both the taxi trip and, later in the Acqua Acetosa sequence, the smoke and whistle of a train that passes by suggest both the area's link to and remoteness from the city center. Shots of the cab Ferdinando rides in draw attention to the abrupt change in environment at the city's edge and juxtapose it with the bustling city they leave behind; the wooden gate skirting the open fields and the dirt road is pieced together from scraps and the roadblock that prevents them from proceeding further reads "lavori in corso." The term applies both to the fragmentary nature of

the landscape and serves as a prescient indicator of future development along the outer limits of Rome.

The space surrounding what is now the Circonvallazione Salaria along the northern margin of the city provides a visual confirmation of Italo Insolera's definition of a *borgata* as "una sottospecie di borgo: un pezzo di città in mezzo alla campagna, che non è nè l'una nè l'altra cosa" (1962: 139). Ferdinando's flight on foot is organized around a backward dolly along a dusty dirt road; his attempts to evade capture allow the camera to explore the disparate characteristics of the natural environment and the discordant array of habitations spread out across the periphery. The Acqua Acetosa sequence introduces the rural character of the edge of the city with open fields, dirt roads and freely roaming chickens. A shot of Ferdinando fleeing on a road flanked by leafless trees through a "spontaneous" *borgata* situated alongside a series of high-rises synthesizes the conflicting elements that determine the character of Rome in *Guardie e ladri*. The mise-en-scène privileges the landscape throughout the sequence; the placement of the camera frequently pre-empts the movements of the characters, as in the low-angle shot of the muddy field and the long shot of the path through the *borgata*, to scrutinize the peculiar nature of the environs. The camera returns to the backward dolly that proceeds down the barren path at multiple points during the scene, providing a sense of limitless expanse beyond the city itself.

Guardie e ladri shares the anxiety over the sterile facades of the "alveari umani" hastily built to address the postwar housing crisis in *Totò cerca casa* during the Acqua Acetosa sequence. Ferdinando flees along a muddy dirt road in a long

shot that features a row of *palazzoni* looming on the horizon and a string of hovels just off the path to the right. Officer Bottoni's humorous exhortation, "Fermate! Che questo è americano! Che figura ce fanno all'estero!" betrays his Roman popular origins and is laden with figurative meaning. The line calls to mind the growing concern of conservative politicians, namely Giulio Andreotti, in the early fifties about the representation of Italy that neorealism presented to the rest of the world, but the presence of the high rises and the fact that Ferdinando appears to be running *from* them also critiques the "alveari umani" that mar the cityscape and further contribute to the distortion of Rome's topography. The implication is that the nature of Rome's development, the deregulation of the real-estate industry and the isolated groupings of high-rises springing up are beginning to negatively impact the image of the "eternal city."

Ferdinando Esposito's neighborhood, located at the western limit of the city, south of the Vatican along via Gregorio VII, is even more decrepit than the city's northern edge. Here an unofficial *borgata* meets a number of uninviting apartment buildings and modest structures scattered around what can only be described as a wasteland as of yet untouched by the reconstruction. Bava's cinematography once again explores the city perimeter and the clash between the urban and the rural in shots that juxtapose Esposito's *palazzo* with the shanties of a "spontaneous" *borgata* in the open space adjacent to it. An overcast sky, rain and mud accentuate the gloomy atmosphere of the area that takes up the most significant portion of time on screen. A key feature of this dreary peripheral district is its proximity to the Vatican. The dome of Saint Peter's figures prominently in seven separate exterior shots in

the second half of the film, a recurring image that opens up a dialogue with Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* and questions the ability or willingness of the Church to succor its closest neighbors in need.¹³

In an interview with Sebastiano Mondadori, Monicelli states that “La commedia all’italiana è animata da uno spirito laico,” and the cynical view of Saint Peter’s in *Guardie e ladri* provides one of the earliest examples of this aspect of the future Italian style comedy (2005: 36). Whereas *Totò e Carolina* will openly attack the national religion through the figure of an inept priest, *Guardie e ladri* suggests the unresponsiveness of the Church to the suffering of the nation’s destitute inhabitants largely through the visual motif in the cinematography, first suggested by Santissimo Nome di Maria al Foro Traiano discernible in the skyline of the opening pan in the Forum, and emphasized through Saint Peter’s in the background of Ferdinando Esposito’s bleak neighborhood. The critique of the Church’s failure to offer tangible aid to the city’s poor is reinforced by a sequence in which Ferdinando, after having been asked by his wife to bring flowers to the Bottoni family in exchange for their generosity toward his son Libero, visits a shrine to Saint Anthony to seek help in procuring the gift. A number of bouquets adorn the monument to the saint and Ferdinando comically asks Saint Anthony if he may take a few flowers from his shrine since he has so many. After a pause for a response to his inquiry he offers an aphoristic justification for his theft, “Chi tace consente,” and steals a modest bunch of flowers from the shrine. This brief scene is not simply humorous,

¹³ The repeated shots of the dome may have suggested the disconcerting view of a church dome repeated in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma* (1962), discussed at length by John David Rhodes in *Pasolini’s Rome: Stupendous, Miserable City* (2007: 110-35).

for it also connects the inactivity and unresponsiveness of the Saint to that of the Church as a whole as well as to Ferdinando's need to steal.

The dome first appears in a medium close-up of Aldo Fabrizi during his initial visit to scout the area in which the composition is balanced by the dreary street and Saint Peter's in the distance. The shot draws attention to itself, for the blurred background of the frame conflicts with the rest of the film's meticulous deep focus photography. As suggested by the film's title, *Guardie e ladri* is a story of recognition and understanding between two diametrically opposed categories, cops and robbers, the antagonism between these categories and the inflexibility of the bureaucratic laws and regulations that support them. The distortion of the image reflects Bottoni's skewed vision or incomplete understanding of Esposito's situation. His assumptions about the thief and his family change as he becomes familiar with the neighborhood and the motivations behind Ferdinando's thievery.

Although in a number of interviews Monicelli acknowledges *Roma città aperta*'s importance to the evolution of Italian film and to his own works by identifying the origin of the *commedia all'italiana* in the famous *padellata* sequence that precedes Pina's death, *Guardie e ladri* repeatedly draws attention to the simplistic Manichean distinctions substantiated by *Roma città aperta*.¹⁴ The film contains a conspicuous number of shots framed to distinctively split the screen geometrically, most often buildings and electrical poles dividing the frame vertically, as in the corner of the Esposito family's apartment complex, but the visual motif is

¹⁴ Peter Brunette observes that *Roma città aperta*'s screenplay "manages to stay on the easy level of heroism and cowardice" (1996: 44); Peter Bondanella states that the film "reflects a stark juxtaposition of good [...] and evil" (1993: 50).

also frequently discernible through shadows and doorframes. Bava's cinematography privileges geometrical contrast and chiaroscuro effects, accentuated by costume choice, that juxtapose black and white and light and shadow to allude to the film's challenge to the validity of the sorts of rigid divisions (licit/illicit, good/evil, rich/poor, etc.) encouraged by Italian institutions and the Church.

A significant portion of the film depicts family interaction within the walls of the respective apartments of the protagonists. On the whole, these domestic sequences serve to establish the similarity between the family dynamics and preoccupations of the two households. Yet, one of the most interesting episodes that takes place in the Esposito apartment, the scene in which Mr. Esposito's son Libero reads his school essay about his father, offers an interesting appraisal of the neorealist movement in the early 1950s. After reading an accurate but denigrating portrait of the sorts of things an unemployed father must do in order to support his family, Ferdinando tears up Libero's essay and expresses his opinion on its unembellished content: "I temi bisogna scriverli di fantasia, capisci? Inventare delle cose sentimentali, graziose, carine. Non scrivere delle cose che succedono nella vita. Che c'entra la vita?!" Libero's composition and Ferdinando's response to it is an astute commentary on the conservative opinion of neorealism, reflected in Giulio Andreotti's famous letter to De Sica, and an insightful premonition on the course that popular Italian cinema would follow to cater to the wishes of the popular

cinema-going public.¹⁵ Although Luigi Comencini's pink neorealist box-office hit *Pane, amore e fantasia*, a film that will top the charts in 1953 with a lighthearted, rural love story, is still two years away, Mr. Esposito's lines define the fifties *filone* effectively. The screenwriters insert commentary on current Italian film polemic in jest, both admonishing the audience for their low tolerance for dramatic realism and their complicity in the government's scheme to eliminate it from national theaters, and also to suggest *Guardie e ladri's* hybrid style as a possible solution to the problem: comedy as both entertainment and as didactic tool for social awareness with potential for greater appeal to popular audiences.

The essay sequence and the scene that immediately follows it, a melodramatic exchange between Ferdinando and his wife, Donata, is a perfect example of the shift between the tragic and the comic that is a defining characteristic of the *commedia all'italiana* proper. The juxtaposition of Libero's essay and the discussion between Ferdinando and Donata demonstrates that the "sbalzi di tono" that Monicelli associates with his own cinema begins well before the "inaugural" film of the Italian style comedy, *I soliti ignoti*, a technique common in his films with Totò (Mondadori 2005: 232-233). As soon as Ferdinando enters the kitchen to find his wife alone, her dialogue and a melodramatic soundtrack announce an abrupt tonal shift that focuses on the difficulties facing the lower classes in the postwar period:

¹⁵ Andreotti's letter concerning *Umberto D*, entitled "piaghe sociali e necessità di redenzione," was first published in the Christian Democrat weekly *Libertas* on February 28, 1952, just three months after *Guardie e ladri's* release. Andreotti indicates a clear aversion to neorealism and a preference for "[opere] di fantasia." The letter is reproduced in Baldi (147-50).

DONATA. Vuoi trovare la tavola apparecchiata? E i soldi? Ti rendi conto che da un mese non hai mandato nemmeno un centesimo? Il macellaio non vuole farmi più credito, il fornaio mi guarda male, non ho più il coraggio di uscire da casa. Come si fa . . . sono stanca . . .

FERDINANDO. E io no? Cosa credi che sono stato a divertirmi tutto questo tempo? Cosa credi che ho dormito al Grand Hotel? Sapessi dove ho dormito! Ma adesso non ti preoccupare, c'ho un buonissimo affare . . .

DONATA. Sì, i soliti affari!

FERDINANDO. Questa volta si tratta di svizzeri.

DONATA. Ma sì le solite cose . . . stai fuori tutto il giorno e non combini mai niente e intanto continuiamo a cenare col caffè latte.

The exchange between husband and wife provides ample justification for his petty thievery. Ferdinando's wife, children, father, and brother-in-law are all unemployed and depend on his meager means of existence. During this touching discussion Mario Bava employs high key lighting with accentuated shadows that fall primarily on Ferdinando; not only does the mise-en-scène provide a visual indicator of the difference in tone relative to the scenes that precede and follow it, but the contrasts between light and shadow also call into question the validity of Ferdinando's actions and the commonly accepted categories of right and wrong. In the comic follow-up to the conversation in the kitchen, Mr. Esposito uses a hook on a string to pilfer a salami from the meat shop below his house, a trick that recalls Totò fishing from the

cliff above the restaurant in *Fermo con le mani*. Much like Torretota and Mr. Lomacchio from *Totò cerca casa*, the items that Fernando attempts to steal are foodstuffs, for example the grain sacks from the charity event, or the chicken that he attempts to grab while eluding Officer Bottoni during the chase in *Acqua Acetosa*. But the seemingly comic act of stealing meat with a string becomes moving once the viewer is reminded of the fact that Ferdinando does it in order to save face in front of his family.

In his review of *Guardie e ladri*, Nino Ghelli explains that over the course of the film the events lead to a kind of role reversal:

un complesso di vicende . . . conducono i due protagonisti quasi ad un rovesciamento della loro abituale posizione reciproca, per un'istanza umana che si manifesta dentro di essi con una urgenza superiore all'arida inflessibilità dei codici e delle leggi. (1952: 87)

The film continually stresses the communality between the police officer and the thief, resulting in a friendship that develops in the conclusion. The *Acqua Acetosa* episode establishes that they are both men with the same basic needs; at one point Bottoni pauses to drink water at a fountain moments after Ferdinando has done the same. Bottoni is chastised by the American for interrupting the chase, and he justifies his actions in terms that highlight these common necessities: "Ma lui ha bevuto, bevo pure io!" Once in custody, Ferdinando is chained to Bottoni, and a two shot in medium close up in the run down *osteria* underscores the connection between them. Their conversation touches on the black and white distinctions the film queries, such as "simpatia" and "antipatia" in reference to the dog they pass

during the pursuit, and Bottoni justifies his treatment of Ferdinando through his position: “Non dimenticare che io sono la guardia e tu il ladro, eh!”

The conversation between Lorenzo and Ferdinando that takes place in the entryway near the stairs up to the Esposito’s apartment marks a pivotal moment in the film: at this point the policeman and thief come to recognize their common struggles and overcome the hostility toward one another. The shift from an antagonistic relationship to mutual understanding is expressed through the camera work. The shot/reverse shot at the beginning of the confrontation shifts to a two shot of the protagonists together in a single frame as they come to realize that they are both fathers trying to provide for their families, as made clear by their dialogue. Ferdinando justifies his thievery as a need to support those dependent on him: “Io devo fa’ per forza. Cosa crede lei, che sia una cosa facile mandare avanti una famiglia?” Lorenzo Bottoni replies by stating his need to keep his job for his own family: “Perché io non c’ho famiglia?”

This liminal space between public and private, made clear by the stairwell and the children visible outside beyond the doorless entry to the building, connects the periphery of Rome to Esposito’s hardships and lack of employment. The shadows of the rail on the stairwell along the floor adumbrate Ferdinando’s inevitable incarceration and also suggest that the marginalization of the city’s poor in the areas separated from Rome hinders the physical and class mobility of its inhabitants. The exterior is an essential backdrop to their conversation, for it allows Ferdinando’s personal tragedy to extend to the neighborhood as a whole.

In the film's last sequence, Ferdinando and Lorenzo pause in front of an *osteria* on their way to police headquarters. Esposito then inquires about the diegetic music coming from inside. Bottoni does not recognize it and Lorenzo wistfully whistles the familiar tune in an attempt to recall it with no success. The melody that Esposito hears is from a famous song sung by Anna Magnani, "La fioraia del Pincio," in the 1940 *rivista* starring De Curtis and directed by Michele Galdieri, *Quando meno te l'aspetti*. Alberto Anile views this theatrical borrowing as an indication that *Guardie e ladri* is the decisive moment in which Totò breaks with his variety theater past to follow a course indebted to neorealism: "è come se voltassero le spalle al ricordo della rivista per avviarsi malinconicamente verso una nuova carriera" (Anile 1998: 122). More than simply a doleful goodbye to Totò and Fabrizi's past experience, Monicelli and Steno contrast their novel comedy with the lighthearted films of Mario Mattoli that often recycle musical numbers and scenarios from Totò's theatrical repertoire, and also draw attention to *Guardie e ladri's* criticism of neorealism's weak points (i.e., Rossellini's all-too-eager optimism in *Roma città aperta* and De Sica's misrepresentation of the shantytowns in the neorealist fable *Miracolo a Milano*).

In the final shot of *Guardie e ladri*, as Ferdinando guides a hesitant Lorenzo through his neighborhood toward the police station, the *mise-en-scène* synthesizes the film's message. The screen is split vertically by a utility pole, with the dome of Saint Peter's visible in the background on the left and a squalid housing complex on the right. Mud, debris, and the cloud-covered sky provide an atmosphere that is as bleak as the depiction of the Roman Forum from the opening of the film. Remi

Fournier Lanzoni reads the presence of St. Peter's in the background as "a symbol of unjust fate" (34). Ferdinando's comment, "non è giusto," after Bottoni's explanation of life as a game with winners and losers during their conversation by the stairs, might seem to provide support for his reading, yet *Guardie e ladri*'s exploration of the distance of the periphery from many of the benefits of the city, the lack of a proper community and the resources required to encourage an improvement in the lives of Rome's poorest citizens points out that some are doomed at the start by their living conditions.

The last shot in *Guardie e ladri* constitutes one of the darkest moments in Italian comedy before the advent of the *commedia all'italiana*. The visual reference to the conclusion of *Roma città aperta* overturns the optimism suggested by the iconic cityscape. What was for Rossellini typically a positive message, "a vision of hope" according to Peter Bondanella and a "symbol of regeneration" for Millicent Marcus, in *Guardie e ladri* becomes a sign of failure and lack of progress in the years following World War II (1993: 62; 1986: 52). The final shot serves as an indictment of the "reconstruction" of Rome, the paucity of suitable housing, the irregularity of the city's development, and the shortcomings of Italian institutions in helping those in need. The cynicism associated with the future Italian style comedy and its evolutionary link to neorealism are cleverly embodied by the visual citation from *Roma città aperta*.

v. Italian Bureaucracy: *Totò e i re di Roma* (1952)

Guardie e ladri was predictably lauded by many film critics upon release for its borrowings from the neorealist aesthetic and the increase in verisimilitude of Fabrizi and Totò's protagonists relative to their comic performances of the previous decade. *Totò e i re di Roma* (1952) is arguably Monicelli's most vehement attack on postwar Italy's bureaucracy and value system, yet commentators tended to lambast the film for what they saw as a return to the conventions of comic films of the past.¹⁶ Totò's penchant for the macabre, the film's surreal or cartoonish sequences, a scene that takes place in a variety theater, and the inclusion of a number of attractive actresses was all too easily viewed as a step backwards and a capitulation to audiences and producers, therefore pulling attention away from the elements that comprise an acrid critique of Italian bureaucrats and boldly hint at the continuity between fascism and the government led by the Christian Democrats. *Totò e i re di Roma* does maintain more of a connection to old-fashioned farce than Steno and Monicelli's *Guardie e ladri*, yet the filmmakers also experiment with a heightened degree of the grotesque and with fantastic sequences that provide models for future Italian style comedies.

Like Beniamino Lomacchio, the protagonist of *Totò e i re di Roma* is a low-level bureaucrat who barely earns enough to support his family. Ercole Pappalardo, head archivist at the ministry, hopes to obtain the title of *cavaliere* and a meager increase in his salary in order to adequately provide for his wife and five daughters.

¹⁶ For a sampling of reviews of *Totò e i re di Roma*, see Caldiron (2001: 130-32) and Delvino (2008: 47-48).

After an embarrassing moment at the variety theater in which Pappalardo accidentally sneezes on Langherozzi, the director general of the ministry, from the balcony above, Pappalardo's bungled attempts to apologize and a series of other mishaps cause Langherozzi to look closely into Pappalardo's past. When his boss finds out that he has not even completed his elementary education, he must pass an oral examination or risk losing his job. The exam ends badly, so the unemployed Pappalardo decides to pursue a desperate measure to procure the funds his family requires: in death, he will seek out winning lotto numbers and visit his wife in her dreams to pass them on to her. Although the title directly references a question pertaining to Roman history asked during the elementary oral examination that Pappalardo takes in an attempt to save his career, the kings of Rome are revealed to be those at the top of the bureaucratic chain of command who wield the power to promote or crush the hopes of those struggling to make their way up from further down the status hierarchy.

The opening sequence indicates that the bureaucracy is the primary target of the film's satire. An establishing shot of the exterior of a large government building cuts to a medium shot of a fatigued Ercole Pappalardo as he climbs the stairs and approaches the entryway among dozens of other men and women who make their way into the ministry; prominent columns in the background recall the nation's Roman heritage and the distant origins of the postwar bureaucratic system. The afflicted, pensive Pappalardo proceeds down the hallway and is flanked by a number of formally dressed bureaucrats solemnly heading towards their destinations. The doorman utilizes a series of obsequious titles according to the

status of those who pass by, including “cavaliere,” “ragioniere,” and “dottore.” A humorous exchange between Pappalardo and the doorman reveals that Ercole has been passed over numerous times in the last fifteen years for a promotion while the doorman insists that the archivist refer to him as “cavaliere” according to a recent advancement. Pappalardo’s response to this situation becomes a recurring expression of his frustration with the injustice inherent in the system as a whole: “Poi dicono che uno si butta a sinistra!” The exclamation comically acknowledges the political divide in the early fifties, but it also voices his disapproval of the establishment’s failure to adequately compensate him for his years of dedicated service. Deemed tolerable by the Ufficio Centrale’s censorship committee as a line of dialogue in the film, the original title of Steno and Monicelli’s film, *E poi dicono che uno. . .*, was rejected (Anile 1998: 127), presumably to obscure the film’s bitter message of dissatisfaction with the nation’s inadequate progress in the years following the war.

The rise of the *maggiorate fisiche* and the allure of voluptuous female bodies in postwar Italian cinema are readily associated with pink neorealism but Antonio De Curtis’ films are not alien to the phenomenon. *Totò e i re di Roma* comments on the scopophilic tendencies of Italian men and draws attention to the increasing exploitation of the female body for box-office appeal. Many of Totò’s films in the 1950s, such as *Totò, Peppino e la malafemmina* (1956) and *Totò e le donne* (1952), feature curvaceous actresses in order to boost ticket sales, and Monicelli even admits that women in Totò films are typically exploited as objects, even though his own projects occasionally problematize the shameless appeal to audiences with

gratuitous shots of certain feminine attributes that were frequently used to compensate for the shortcomings of hastily made, low-budget productions.¹⁷ In *Totò e i re di Roma*, Pappalardo's oldest daughters, Ines (played by Giovanna Pala) in particular, as well as the bodies of the dancers performing on stage at the variety theater, provide visual allure to male spectators with their provocative costumes. The first scene in which the female body is put on display in *Totò e i re di Roma* is worthy of note, for it draws more attention to the peculiar fascination of Italian men with the female body and their shameless scrutiny of it than it does to the female form itself.

In the sequence the passage of the director of the ministry's new secretary Corradini down the hallway captures the attention of all of the male personnel in the ministry. The camera assumes the point of view of the onlookers as Corradini drops a stack of papers and bends over to pick them up. Subsequent shots focus on the faces of the men as they leer at the secretary, and a close-up of Totò and his exaggerated facial expression serves to heighten the comic effect. Although the female body is put on display for the men at the ministry and the male spectators, the focus of the sequence is not her attributes but rather the unabashed ogling of the woman by the bureaucrats at the ministry. Monicelli satirizes this tendency of

¹⁷ "Le donne, nei film di Totò, servono solo per dare pimento, come una bella scenografia, diciamo [. . .] Sono un oggetto, bellissimi oggetti che aiutano i film e i produttori a far entrare nei cinematografi un po' più gente" (qtd. in Faldini and Fofi 1977: 228). *Totò e Carolina* is the most obvious exception to this generalization; Monicelli also overlooks the fundamental roles of the wives of Totò's protagonists in the films that he co-directed with Steno.

Italian men and draws attention to what Laura Mulvey refers to as “the male gaze.”¹⁸ This momentary reflection on the sordid nature of looking is similar to the object of ridicule in Carlo Lizzani’s segment of *Amore in città* (1953) entitled *Gli italiani si voltano*, a work that criticizes the obsession with leering at the female body that a sexually repressive Catholic society encourages. *Totò e i re di Roma* therefore provides an early example of the ways in which the camera pokes fun at the “male gaze” of the protagonists of the future *commedia all’italiana*. In many of these films the self-proclaimed seducers of future comedies boast of sexual exploits but are frequently revealed to be adept only at looking and talking about imagined conquests.

Pappalardo’s job as head archivist in the mouse-ridden, dust-covered library of the ministry provides little gratification. Countless numbered volumes line the shelves surrounding Pappalardo’s workstation at the registry suggesting the tedium of his post. His unadorned desk and chair in the corner of the library require a doughnut-shaped cushion to sit on and padded sleeves to lean on to support long hours of discomfort while sifting through documents. A makeshift fan above his desk recalls elements of early Totò films, like the glass shard mirror and the colander shower in *Fermo con le mani* that comically indicate Totò’s poverty and resourcefulness, and underscore the absence of amenities in his work environment. Despite the fact that he is employed, Ercole’s surroundings are modest and his position is low in the bureaucratic hierarchy; the spaces in the ministry introduce

¹⁸ See Mulvey’s seminal article entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” first published in *Screen* in 1975 and reproduced in Braudy and Cohen (1999: 833-44).

the film's meditation on the unequal distribution of wealth during the nation's recovery from World War II.

Pappalardo's workspace is juxtaposed with the sumptuous office of the general director, an expansive room filled with paintings, statues, ornate furniture, velvet drapes, and wall-mounted lamps that make the squalor of the archives readily apparent. The medium shot of Langherozzi at his bureau synthesizes the ostentation of his high-level bureaucratic position through various elements of mise-en-scène, including the ornate chair in which he sits, his tailored pin-striped suit, unctuous, slicked-back hair, and the flowing robes of the figure in the painting in the background behind his desk. A Roman bust and a statue of a figure on horseback accompany the inflated, formal language that characterizes his dialogue, hinting at a link between the high-powered officials of the postwar establishment and the fascist regime by recalling Mussolini's emphasis on Rome's illustrious past and unification through standardized language. Langherozzi's association with the Christian Democrat administration is made clear when he discloses that he plans to run for an unspecified political position. The film intimates that the conservative government of postwar Italy is dominated by the wealthy that run for office in order to look out for their own interests. Langherozzi and his ilk contribute to Pappalardo's difficulties and by implication to the considerable divide between the poor and the affluent in the early 1950s.

One of the ways in which *Totò e i re di Roma* condemns the Italian bureaucracy is through the excessive emphasis placed on job titles and arbitrary advancements at the ministry and the servility required to obtain them. Alberto

Sordi's character, Pappalardo's comic nemesis Mr. Balocco, is identifiable as a relentless sycophant from the moment he enters the door of Langherozzi's office. The excessive formality and the affectations of Balocco's address to the head of the ministry, including "Riverisco a Vostra Eccellenza," and "sono oltremodo radioso di vederLa," provide a grotesque representation of the obsequiousness of those hoping to obtain favors from their superiors. Pappalardo's colleagues also offer a comic critique of the bureaucracy through a complex chart that one of them supplies in the registry in order to determine the possible outcomes of certain personnel shifts and their effects on the pay grade. This discussion is raised again during Filippini's funeral, a fellow employee at the ministry; his co-workers are more concerned with moving up the bureaucratic chain than they are with the death of their colleague. Released nearly a decade before Ermanno Olmi's *Il posto* (1961), *Totò e i re di Roma* may have suggested a similar scene near the conclusion of the Olmi film in which the passing of a white-collar worker results in an argument over who deserves to take the empty desk in the office left by his absence. The obsessive preoccupation with moving up in the working world and the inappropriate timing of their discussion at the funeral approaches the level of the grotesque characteristic of the future *commedia all'italiana*.

In *Totò e i re di Roma*, the memory of fascism and the war is not far behind. Steno and Monicelli ridicule the backwardness of the fascist bureaucracy that created and filled positions through party connections in order to expand its sphere of influence and obliquely critique the persistence of the same clientelistic practices in the newly established Republic. In a humorous sequence in which Ercole meets

with his boss, Capasso, after Langherozzi receives his poorly written letter of apology, Pappalardo is forced to disclose how he obtained his post in the archives without the proper credentials. Totò delivers a memorable pantomime of the March on Rome, but Capasso fails to understand the hint. When Ercole quietly explains that he secured the job through a fascist cousin in 1922, Capasso's response reflects the prevailing attitude toward the regime in the years following the war that contributed to an unsuccessful purge of fascist officials in suggesting that Pappalardo hide his connection to the party: "Certe parentele è meglio tenerle nascoste."¹⁹ Ercole attempts to defend his position by citing years of hard work and dedication in the archives, and Capasso's retort supplies one of the film's most acrimonious statements about the persistence of injustice in the new Republic largely attributable to the failure to significantly alter a bureaucratic system based more on connections and titles than on performance and probity: "Lavoro e onestà sono fesserie!"

The outlandish search for Maestro Calogero Belloni's parrot provides additional commentary on the link between postwar bureaucracy and the regime. Langherozzi orders Pappalardo to seek out a parrot for Mr. Balocco that once belonged to a famous composer by the name of Belloni because the bird supposedly had a peculiar talent for reproducing song melodies. Balocco's visual description of a parrot with red, white, and green feathers establishes a comic reference to the flag and metonymically represents the nation as a whole. Ercole attempts to track the

¹⁹ For a discussion of *epurazione* and the continuity between the state apparatus in postwar Italy and fascism, see Ginsborg (1990: 91-93).

bird down but he discovers that the parrot was executed by the partisans in 1944 for singing “Giovinezza,” the fascist party anthem. The parrot’s association with blindly repeating whatever it hears applies both to the fanaticism of the regime and to the lackeys like Mr. Balocco who constitute a significant part of the postwar bureaucracy. The fact that Totò’s character’s surname bears a resemblance to the Italian *pappagallo* further connects his position as archivist at the ministry to the repetitive, mechanical work required of the bureaucrats who aspire to make their way up the status hierarchy.

Ercole, like Totò’s other protagonists in previous “neorealist comedies” directed by Steno and Monicelli, struggles to support his family but the Pappalardos also manifest a growing concern with maintaining appearances that hints at aspirations that become increasingly important as the nation’s economic situation improves. The family dinner offers revealing details about Ercole’s home life and establishes his family’s constant concern over fiscal constraints. A cluttered medium shot in which Pappalardo, his wife and five daughters are tightly gathered around the table visually encapsulates their strained situation and their reliance on Ercole to provide for all of them. The dinner conversation centers on their hardships, as Ercole’s wife Armida comments on the inadequacy of the meal (“Ci dividiamo in sette persone una razione che è scarsa per due”) and the family is all too familiar with the date of the arrival of his next paycheck. Other small details further allude to their pecuniary preoccupations: the family has not bought coffee in over a year and Armida lies to her neighbor about taking a family vacation in Rapallo. Despite the fact that they cannot afford it, they strive to maintain the appearance of a

comfortable, petit bourgeoisie lifestyle. The dinner sequence, like the interior spaces at the ministry, points out gross imbalances in the social structure of the early fifties and references the persistence of hardship even for a family headed by a government employee. The fact that the Pappalardos are living beyond their means and are concerned with a “bella figura” demonstrates the increasing importance of image in Italian comedies of the 1950s, a preoccupation of the *commedia all’italiana* that will become sacrosanct for Italian households with the rise of consumerism accompanying the economic boom.

Totò e i re di Roma exploits Mario Monicelli’s signature tonal shift in a manner similar to that of the discussion between Ferdinando and Donata Esposito in *Guardie e ladri*. The most dramatic moments of *Totò e i re di Roma* take place during and immediately following the oral examination. After a series of humorous responses to basic questions that establish Ercole Pappalardo’s low level of education, the soundtrack abruptly changes to a melodramatic tune as he tells his melancholy story to the examination committee. He explains that although he may not know the facts that they ask him, he is certainly aware of the cost of basic needs required to support himself and his family. The sentimental discourse and dramatic film score is juxtaposed with surreal farce when Mr. Balocco, the missing member of the examination committee, returns to fail Ercole and crush his hope of keeping his job. Pappalardo asks if he is familiar with the meaning of “paliatone,” a Neapolitan word used to describe a merciless beating, and when Balocco admits that he does not know the term pandemonium ensues. A cartoonish close-up of Balocco after Ercole leaves the room prominently shows his missing teeth and his head jutting out

of a map. The farcical tone abruptly shifts to sadness in the following scene in which Pappalardo returns home to share the bad news and explain his intention to die.

One of the most memorable portions of the film is the ludicrous sequence in which Ercole heads his own funeral procession, leading his family, friends and colleagues to the cemetery in which he will be buried. Taking into consideration the high cost of a funeral after his decision to commit suicide, Pappalardo dresses appropriately for the somber event and leads the way to the site of his burial. In what Alberto Anile describes as “una scena grottesca e impressionante, capolavoro dell’assurdo e del humour nero,” the scene pays homage to the macabre element of early Totò films and provides an early example of Monicelli’s penchant for pairing comedy and death, a technique exemplified by Cosimo’s sudden demise in *I soliti ignoti* (1998: 125-26). Nino Rota’s soundtrack, an outlandish funereal march, underscores the ridiculousness of the situation and heightens its darkly comic effect.

The afterlife in *Totò e i re di Roma* is surprisingly similar to postwar Rome and offers Pappalardo little respite from the frustrations of his daily life on earth. The first figure Ercole encounters after his ambiguous death, an official donning a white uniform not unlike that of a traffic cop, treats him brusquely and demands to know where he is headed. Olympus proper, a structure with great halls and Roman columns constructed in Cinecittà studios is characterized by long cues, required documentation and medical exams, and the rules and regulations are enforced by a bureaucracy and a police force similar to the Rome that Ercole dealt with in his terrestrial life.

Pappalardo is later is caught up in a raid on the black market through which he obtains the winning lotto numbers he seeks for his family. The forces of Olympus that arrive in jeeps with cudgels in hand to put a stop to the illegal activities bear a striking resemblance to the notoriously violent riot police squad (the *celere*) created by Mario Scelba to quash popular protests against the conservative postwar establishment. Ercole in fact meets God himself, and in the final scene, despite his black market dealings and impertinent attitude, he is sent immediately to heaven upon revealing that he has worked as a state employee for thirty years. Ercole's life on earth is treated as a sort of purgatorial penance, worthy of reward in the afterlife. The conclusion in Olympus, with the marked presence of authoritarian police and various bureaucrats next to God's office, comments on the close relationship between the Church and the postwar administration and implies that they are partly to blame for the protagonist's dissatisfaction.

Totò e i re di Roma, like *Guardie e ladri*, attracted the attention of censors with references to strikes, left wing politics, suicide, and an unflattering portrait of the afterlife that conflicted with the Catholic Church's idealistic vision. The bitterness of the film's conclusion, both in its suggestion that suicide might be a solution to Pappalardo's problems and that Olympus offers no respite from the frustrations of life in postwar Italy, was especially problematic. The film undermines the sort of "healthy and constructive optimism" Giulio Andreotti requested in his open letter to Vittorio De Sica 1952 and also offends Catholic sensibilities in daring to represent the afterlife on screen. Alberto Anile believes that the voice over before the fade out at the conclusion of the film that determines the events to be an

innocuous dream was added to placate the Ufficio Centrale. The brevity of the narrator's statement, "E questo fu il sogno di Ercole Pappalardo!" suggests that it was an afterthought and it ultimately has little effect on the impact of *Totò e i re di Roma's* satirical attack on postwar Italy. The fact that God tells Pappalardo that he can head straight to heaven despite his illegal activities after he reveals his line of work on earth, equates bureaucratic employment to a form of purgative punishment. Dreams do not necessarily efface the polemic nature of the comedy; here the fantasy reveals discontent and the psychological effect of his frustrations with his situation. The film is unique in that it shifts away from a strict neorealist model and incorporates greater degree of the grotesque in its satirical depiction of postwar bureaucracy. Despite the fact that Monicelli's future Italian style comedies contain very little fantasy, *Totò e i re di Roma* presents an important model for other filmmakers of the *commedia all'italiana*, including Pietro Germi and Antonio Pietrangeli.²⁰

vi. Film Comedy, Censorship, and Totò's Contribution to the *commedia all'italiana*:

Totò e Carolina (1956)

In *Totò proibito*, Alberto Anile carefully documents the censorship of Totò's films between 1946 and 1967. He points out that Totò's cleverness and ability to conceal critiques and references to subjects that the Christian Democrat administration and the Church aimed to suppress posed considerable difficulties for

²⁰ E.g., Fefé's daydreams in *Divorzio all'italiana* (1961) and Andrea's paranoid musings in *Il magnifico cornuto* (1964).

the Ufficio Centrale: Totò “diceva e non diceva, scagliava pietre con mano talmente veloce da sembrare invisibile” (2005: 117). Subtle allusions and plays on words often permitted Totò to touch on unmentionable subjects, including sex, politics and religion without incurring the wrath of the censorship committees. Yet, dozens of Totò films spanning his cinematographic career required a multitude of slight modifications of dialogue or brief cuts of problematic shots and sequences. Many of these excisions were trivial and often involved celluloid revealing more of the female body than was deemed acceptable for audiences in a conservative Catholic atmosphere. But the censorship committees eventually began to take note of the contentious topics featured in Totò’s collaborations with Monicelli and their apprehension confirms the growing potential of comedy as social commentator over the course of the 1950s, the period in which neorealism’s grip on the national public waned.

The problem began in 1949, the year in which *Totò cerca casa*’s discussion of an issue that the DC would have preferred to keep hidden (i.e., the housing crisis) resulted in an unexpected restriction to audiences aged sixteen and up (Anile 2005: 32). *Guardie e ladri* and *Totò e i re di Roma* ran into the same sort of politically motivated censorship that sought to keep satirical critiques of Italian authorities and institutions out of Italian theaters. Increasing attention on Totò and his potential as a subversive tool culminates in the butchering of *Totò e Carolina*, one of the most heavily censored films in Italian history, for approaching topics including Italy’s police force, the Church, communism, suicide, prostitution and illegitimate pregnancy. Once Totò’s potential as a vehicle for social and moral messages, and

therefore as a surrogate for neorealism, became clear in his collaborations with Monicelli, the conservative administration used the Ufficio Centrale to discourage further development in a similar vein.

In Monicelli's *Totò e Carolina*, the Tuscan director's first comedy without the collaboration of Steno, De Curtis assumes a profoundly human role similar to that of Ferdinando Esposito in *Guardie e ladri*. Inspired by true events, the film follows many of the dictates of neorealism, offering an inauspicious visual portrait of Italy in the early fifties paired with acrid commentary on the backwardness of postwar Italian society. Like the Principe's earlier films with Steno and Monicelli, *Totò e Carolina* depicts a nation rife with poverty, crime and injustice that conflicts with the Christian Democrat's pretensions to a successful reconstruction. However, relative to previous projects, the film launches an open attack on a much broader level. Corruption, misplaced priorities and indifference are common to of a number of characters representing a wide range of groups in Italian society, including the middle classes, the police force and the representatives of the Catholic Church.

Antonio Caccavallo, a jeep driver for Italy's Pubblica Sicurezza, participates in a raid on prostitution in Villa Borghese in Rome. Eager to join his fellow officers, he leaves his vehicle and finds a young girl whom he assumes is a prostitute. While in custody at police headquarters she passes out from an overdose in what turns out to be an attempted suicide. To avoid a possible newspaper scandal, Caccavallo is ordered by the police commissioner to either bring the girl home or find her an appropriate place to stay, otherwise he risks being passed over for a raise and may lose his job altogether. Antonio and Carolina's road trip through the Italian

countryside provides an opportunity to run into a number of interesting characters, from a parish priest to a truck full of communists. During the events that unfold over the course of their trip, the film uncovers many of the contradictions in postwar Italian society, including the shortcomings of the authorities and the Catholic Church, and the mistreatment of women who fall outside narrow boundaries of acceptability.

The opening sequence of *Totò e Carolina* in Villa Borghese establishes a gloomy atmosphere and dramatic tone that belie the expectations for a comic film. The credits are superimposed over a scene in which an unembellished, middle-aged prostitute stands by a road at night in heavy shadow in Villa Borghese. The film begins with a long shot that cuts to medium close-up of the woman; the camera then proceeds to follow her movements by the road in subtle pans. With neorealist attention to quotidian detail, she checks her makeup, paces, smokes a cigarette and leafs through a magazine while disinterestedly waiting for her next client. She is tricked into agreeing to provide her services to a well-dressed man who turns out to be an undercover agent, and the police then move in to take a number of suspected prostitutes into custody. The protestations of the women in Roman dialect provide the first vaguely comic intrusions in *Totò e Carolina's* first sequence, but the atmosphere remains markedly more dramatic than any opening scene from De Curtis' previous films.

The scene at the police station exposes the hypocritical stance of the state regarding prostitution and challenges common assumptions about women who earn a living through the sex trade. On the way into headquarters, the humanity of the

prostitutes is emphasized; they speak familiarly with each other and with those they pass by and many of them voice their concern for their families. Marzachi, the gruff marshal in charge at the station, chastises the women for their activities in Villa Borghese and runs through their names, most of whom he already knows. In a country in which prostitution is legal, for the Merlin law did not definitively close the nation's brothels until 1958, women who ply their trade outdoors are paradoxically subjected to legal hassles. Marzachi's mention of "schedatura," that is a police record on file and a form of documentation for practicing prostitution, underscores the hypocrisy of the state policies that condone prostitution yet vilify the women constrained to earn their living on the street. The expressive mise-en-scène at the moment in which Marzachi asks Carolina for her documentation links her situation to that of the working girls: Carolina and three other women of varying age, including a young brunette, the middle-aged blonde from the opening sequence, and an older woman, are carefully arranged in a cross pattern that points to the stigma associated with their occupation. Carolina's condition as an unwed mother-to-be is juxtaposed with the treatment of the prostitutes and is symbolically tied to Christian iconography through the cross, suggesting that all of them are victims of the same inflexible ideology of the Catholic Church that considers illegitimate pregnancy and extramarital relations egregious sins.

Caccavallo's visit to the police commissioner's office allows for one of the film's most brazen comments on the backward priorities of the Italian authorities. Antonio must answer to his superior for bringing in Carolina; as a jeep driver he is supposed to remain in his vehicle during raids. An unkempt vagabond who wanders

into the commissioner's office unannounced adds a vulgarly comic intrusion to the scene and reminds the viewer of the suffering on the streets of Rome outside the station when he approaches Caccavallo and asks, "allora senta questo, non è piscio?" After the vagrant is removed from the room, Carolina passes out from an overdose on sleeping pills and afterward the commissioner is more concerned with a possible media scandal than with her well-being. The preoccupation of the authorities with public image over the lives of the citizens they should protect is one of many contributing factors to the injustice *Totò e Carolina* seeks to expose. Caccavallo, in his decision to help Carolina in the end, is posited as a welcome exception to the indifference and the rigidity of laws and regulations associated with the police force.

The sequence in which Officer Caccavallo waits for news of Carolina's condition at the hospital includes a number of highly comic exchanges, yet the scene also condemns the practice of nepotism as well as insensitivity to human suffering. Antonio inquires about the doctor treating Carolina and receives a disconcerting response from one of the nuns about his level of expertise: "Cosa vuole, è appena laureato . . . Ma è figlio del Prof. Rinaldi, il nostro primario . . ." The film criticizes a social structure in which family relationships matter more than merit and Caccavallo comically alludes to it later when he insists on consulting the young Rinaldi's "babbo." A nun humorously misinterprets Antonio's study of police regulations in preparation for an exam for devout prayer, demonstrating the ease with which one can feign piety and hinting at the "devout" who fail to practice what they preach. In a darkly comic moment of the film, Antonio falls asleep on a bed next to Carolina after checking up on her; the maids later wake him to inform him that

the sheets need to be changed because someone died there earlier that day.

Caccavallo, fearing contagion, runs to consult a doctor and is relieved to discover that an old woman simply died of starvation and was a “morto di fame.”

Language plays a significant role in *Totò e Carolina*. The confusion caused by the young doctor’s choice of terminology in explaining that the old woman died of hunger provides an example of the locutions that create difficulty for a considerable portion of the nation. Antonio does not understand the terms “inedia” and “stenti” and the doctor must clarify with the quotidian term “morto di fame.” Caccavallo has problems pronouncing “intimazioni” in the exchange with another officer, played by Mario Castellani, who quizzes him on the police regulations. Police terminology frequently makes its way into Caccavallo’s dialogue, including his comic reference to the socks his son steals as “rifurtiva.” One can discern Henri Bergson’s conception of humor, that is the hardening of language out of habit, in the intrusion of work related locutions in Totò’s dialogue with those not affiliated with the police force. Popular dialect, above all Romanesco, contributes to the film’s realism and adds to the expressive character of Carolina, the prostitutes, and the thief played by Maurizio Arena.

The working-class neighborhood in which Caccavallo and his family live in Rome’s seedy periphery is reminiscent of Ferdinando Esposito’s neighborhood to the west of Rome along via Gregorio VII in *Guardie e ladri*. The absence of vegetation, uninviting apartment complexes and children playing outside connect the film to *Guardie e ladri* and its deliberation on the development of postwar Rome. The sequence that takes place in Caccavallo’s home makes it clear that he barely

earns enough to support his family: Antonio discovers that his son has stolen eggs and socks, basic needs, from his neighbors and his elderly father berates him for it. Caccavallo, an officer of the law and authority figure in his public life, struggles to maintain order in his own home.

The camerawork inside the apartment emphasizes the modest, cramped living space that the family occupies; the layout is revealed through a pan and medium close-ups stand out against the preponderant long shots that characterize the road trip through the countryside. The peculiar statue of *mollica*, a bust of Caccavallo's boss the police commissioner fashioned from moistened breadcrumbs, is prominently displayed in the foreground inside the apartment to highlight Antonio's role as the sole breadwinner of the household and to allude to the adulation required to work his way up the police hierarchy.

The encounter with the communists in the truck on the road trip through the countryside was unsurprisingly one of the sequences most subjected to modification during the film's year-long struggle with the censorship committees.²¹ The communists initially appear to be as rowdy as soccer fanatics, waving flags and singing "bandiera rossa" while crammed in the back of a truck. Caccavallo expresses his disapproval of their erratic driving patterns while trying to pass with a humorous line that hints at his conservative political leanings and references the antagonism between the authorities and the left: "Buttatevi a destra!" When Carolina's intentionally misleading directions get the jeep stuck against a tree on a

²¹ The completed film was first presented to the Ufficio Centrale to obtain permission for public screening in February 1954. After a loss of 573 meters of celluloid and a host of modifications of dialogue, the film was approved in December 1954 and premiered on March 2, 1955 (Bispuri 2010: 205).

steep hill, the affable communists serendipitously appear and offer to help tow the vehicle to safety. The film makes no attempt to inculcate the masses and the communists are not spared in Monicelli's satirical take on Italy in the early 1950s. This is made clear when Caccavallo asks one of the older comrades to watch over Carolina while he supervises the towing of the jeep. Carolina easily manipulates the old man into letting her escape by responding to his question about the reason for her trouble with the law in terms that appeal to his political sensibilities ("Ho menato al padrone"). Although the film obliquely targets the Christian Democrats, the dominant political force in postwar Italy, through its insistence on rampant corruption and exploitation in various facets of Italian society, it also hints at certain weak points of the left, namely the prioritization of ideology over organized collective action.

The "spirito laico" that Monicelli associates with the *commedia all'italiana* factors into *Totò e Carolina's* portrait of the representatives of a small church in the countryside. Of all of the various categories of Italian society lambasted during the course of the film, the Church and the supercilious devout receive the brunt of the attack. Whereas *Guardie e ladri* points to the Catholic Church's failure to succor those in need through the emblematic futility of Saint Peter's dome, *Totò e Carolina* directly satirizes a parish priest and some of the church's faithful. "L'autorità ecclesiastica pontificia parrocchiale sa tutto," Antonio declares when they reach Carolina's hometown, yet the irony in his statement is later made clear when the effeminate priest is stupefied ("stupito") by everything that he hears and ultimately offers no help to the young, unwed mother-to-be. Matteo, the senile sacristan, is

barely capable of understanding orders. The film is most critical of the hypocrisy of those who claim to carry out acts of Christian charity, as the head of Barozzoli family, the household that took care of the orphaned Carolina in the past, attempted to take advantage of her at night, and Zio Francesco, the man who watches over the church's orphans, mercilessly beats a young boy behind the church in front of the priest, Caccavallo and Carolina.

The discussion with the Barozzoli family inside the church points to Catholic ideology as the root cause of the mistreatment of women like Carolina. "Vedrai che sono bravi cristiani, ti prenderanno," the priest remarks with naïve optimism. But when the family arrives they have nothing but scorn for Carolina. They refer to her as "immorale" and are of the opinion that the "svergognata non merita nè pietà nè compassione." Christian piety is demonstrated to be conditional, and the hypocrisy of the Barozzoli's stance is underscored by a painting of Christ and statues of angels and saints that dominate the mise-en-scène. The family is further outraged when the priest reveals that Carolina is pregnant and they storm out of the church in protest. The location of the exchange with the Barozzoli family and the reasons for their rejection of Carolina implicates the Catholic Church in perpetuating the stigma associated with premarital sex and illegitimate pregnancy.

The film's ultimate message is delivered through dialogue in which Caccavallo tries to discourage Carolina from committing suicide, despite the misery inherent in the world around her. He explains that even "uccellini hanno i loro dispiaceri," for example when they cannot find food, but they keep on living despite their difficulties. Just as he concludes his diatribe, the little bird that prompted the

discussion is shot and killed by a hunter passing through, offering a darkly comic commentary on Antonio's attempt at optimism. This abrupt intrusion of death in a primarily comic film adumbrates the often-cited fate of Cosimo in Monicelli's *I soliti ignoti*, a common theme in the *commedia all'italiana* proper. Near the conclusion of the film, Caccavallo offers an explanation for why she cannot commit suicide in terms closely related to class difference and inequality in postwar Italian society: "Il suicidio non è per noi, noi siamo povera gente, il suicidio è roba da ricchi, il suicidio è un lusso, e noi, questo lusso non ce lo possiamo permettere, hai capito? Siamo gente povera." He states that because she is pregnant she cannot kill herself, just as he is unable to kill himself because his father and son depend on him: "non siamo soli nella vita, abbiamo sempre qualcuno."

Caccavallo's decision to offer Carolina a home in the film's final sequence adds a glimmer of hope in an otherwise disconcerting assessment of Italian society in the early 1950s. Yet *Totò e Carolina* lies closer to the Italian style comedy in Peter Bondanella's distinction between the "sometimes facile and optimistic humanitarianism typical of neorealist comedy" and the "darker, more ironic and cynical vision of Italian life" he associates with the *commedia all'italiana* (2004: 145). There are no simple solutions to the widespread problems that the film uncovers and even the protagonists of Monicelli's film have not put an end to their own difficulties. Carolina will still be a pariah to those aware of her background, despite the fact that she has found a home with the Caccavallo family. Antonio secures a coveted raise but he now has two more mouths to feed (Carolina and her child), so it is hard to imagine any improvement in his living situation. The targets of

the film's caustic satire, including the priest, Matteo, the Barozzoli family, the head doctor at the hospital, and the police commissioner, all illustrate a particular mindset, "una mentalità diffusa basata sul conformismo, sulla corruzione e, nel migliore dei casi, sull'idiozia" (Bispuri 2010: 209). The film's bitter dissatisfaction with the Italian republic and the "ironic and cynical vision of Italian life" of the *commedia all'italiana* is succinctly expressed in the sarcastic line delivered near the conclusion of *Totò e Carolina* by Mario Tanzi, the thief played by Maurizio Arena: "Bella repubblica. Bella assai."

Close inspection of Totò's projects with Monicelli challenges many of the common assumptions about Italian cinema in the 1950s. *Guardie e ladri*, with its style as polemic on the failure of reconstruction and the shortcomings of neorealism, *Totò e i re di Roma* with its grotesque take on Italy's bureaucracy, and *Totò e Carolina's* broad attack on Italian society as a whole, all contain more than the "slight overtones of social criticism" that Mira Liehm ascribes to them (1984: 144). The issues with censorship that plagued the Neapolitan actor and the Tuscan director only further substantiate the fact that these works are among the most polemical films of the decade. The primary thematic and stylistic characteristics of the *commedia all'italiana* are present well before *I soliti ignoti*, the film that many critics and historians consider the inaugurator of the genre. As stated by Monicelli,

I soliti ignoti è il punto d'arrivo di un percorso intrapreso con *Totò cerca casa* e già definito in *Guardie e ladri*, che può essere considerato un film di confine. A volte viene indicato come capostipite, altre come precursore della commedia all'italiana. Un fatto è però certo:

l'evoluzione dalla farsa alla commedia di costume è ormai compiuta.
(Mondadori 2005:15)

Remi Fournier Lanzoni's statement that the "experience" of *I soliti ignoti* "took an abrupt, radical shift into social criticism" fails to acknowledge the fact that Monicelli's landmark film is the culmination of a process that began with *Totò cerca casa* (2008: 41). This chapter has argued that social criticism is at the heart of all of Monicelli's films with Totò.

Totò's importance to the evolution of Italian comic cinema cannot be underestimated, for he is the comic actor who successfully combined social commentary and traditional comedy. Totò became Monicelli's link between neorealism and the *commedia all'italiana* because his early films had already demonstrated a number of the important aspects of the future comedies, including *l'arte di arrangiarsi*, poverty, tragedy and death. What was initially lacking was a believable, quotidian portrait of an Italian struggling to get by with whom popular audiences could identify. Characters like Beniamino Lomacchio, Ferdinando Esposito, and Antonio Caccavallo offered Totò the opportunity to distance himself from the outlandish mask of his early career and increase verisimilitude, succeeding where Erminio Macario had failed. After these films indicated the path that Italian comedy would follow, the new protagonists of the *commedia all'italiana* continued to play with the mixture of dramatic and comic registers and represented the everyday man getting by in the years of the economic boom, learning from the techniques that De Curtis and Monicelli used to express disillusionment with postwar Italy.

II: The “Waste Products” of Neorealism

i. The Consensus on *neorealismo rosa*

The comedies of the 1950s associated with the term *neorealismo rosa*, referred to in English language film scholarship as “rosy” or “pink neorealism,” remain among the most denigrated films in the history of Italian cinema. The hostility toward what was perceived as a betrayal of neorealism, above all on the part of leftist film critics, led to a categorical dismissal of the comedies that entertained popular audiences during the years in which the Christian Democrat administration and the Catholic Church closely monitored film content. These critics were of the opinion that a movement with pivotal cultural significance and a moral imperative to change society for the better gave way to escapist entertainment with a consolatory, fatalistic message to be content with what you have (even if it is very little) and not to question the dominant social, religious and political structures of the postwar republic.

The disparaging language commonly used to define pink neorealism does little to hide a widespread, dismissive attitude toward any and all films affiliated with the label. For example, these motion pictures from the 1950s have been referred to as “commercial rip-offs of neorealism,” its “filiazione corrotta” or even the “cascami” of the neorealist movement (Shiel 2006: 112; Torri 1979: 45; Aristarco 1975: 741). The bulk of film criticism from the 1950s and the majority of writings on the history of Italian cinema pertaining to the decade laud neorealism

on the whole and lambast its offspring as lighthearted and escapist, a category of film characterized by *bozzettismo* and anachronism.²² *Bozzetto* is the Italian term for a rough sketch or outline; in the context of postwar cinema *bozzettismo* refers to films that feature an approximation of reality as opposed to a faithful reproduction of it. Gianni Canova sheds light on the negative connotation of *bozzettismo* when applied to comedies of the early 1950s:

l'accusa che viene mossa in genere a tutti questi film è quella di *bozzettismo*: usata come chiave facilmente liquidatoria di un modo di rappresentazione ritenuto *riduttiva* rispetto alle tensioni etiche e drammaturgiche della stagione neorealista. (2003: 259)

According to Bruno Torri, the popular forms of neorealism “[spingono] unicamente all’evasione” and espouse “una rassegnata e assolutoria morale di accettazione dell’esistente” (1979: 39; 40). Torri’s comment and other sweeping statements like it concerning Italian cinema in the 1950s ignore the fact that certain comedies that have been labeled as pink neorealist expose the tensions and contradictions of a nation in transition on its way toward the economic boom through a unique blend of realism, incisive satire, and elements of traditional comedy.

Pink neorealism is the result of a number of conflicting factors in play during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Despite the fact that certain neorealist titles were relatively successful in Italian theaters, many of these motion pictures did not excel at the box office, especially by the beginning of the 1950s. Audiences soon tired of

²² For numerous examples of such writings and a delineation of the prevalent attitudes towards Italian cinema in the 1950s, see Paolo Noto’s comprehensive volume entitled *Dal bozzetto ai generi. Il cinema italiano dei primi anni Cinquanta* (2011).

seeing the misfortunes of the postwar era played out on screen and flocked to genre vehicles for predictable entertainment. Furthermore, neorealism tended to fare better in metropolitan areas among the educated classes and therefore had a limited impact on popular audiences in peripheral and rural areas. Film censorship played as much a part in the rapid decline of neorealism proper as Italian audience demand: the difficulty in securing government funding and finding producers willing to take risks on neorealist projects led to the resurgence of popular genres and the establishment of a “cinema medio” to appeal to a wide national audience. Pink neorealism was essential to this process, as identification of the spectators with protagonists was achieved through “popular” environments and characters distinguished by recognizable stereotypes. An important aspect of the comedies of the 1950s and their appeal throughout the peninsula was regional characteristics, the readily identifiable, Italian elements that differentiated the national cinema from the imported productions flooding the market.²³ *Neorealismo rosa* posed a solution to the problem of audience appeal, as shown by the box-office success of both its rural and urban forms.

The purpose of this chapter is to reevaluate *neorealismo rosa* and the purported return of the escapism of the white telephone comedies of the 1930s through an in-depth analysis of Renato Castellani’s *Due soldi di speranza* (1952), the motion picture commonly recognized as the first pink neorealist film, and its relationship to Luigi Comencini’s *Pane, amore e fantasia* (1953) and Dino Risi’s *Poveri ma belli* (1957). Although the asperity of the popular cinema of the 1950s is

²³ See Daniela Treveri Gennari’s informative article on this subject, “A Regional Charm: Italian Comedy versus Hollywood” (2009).

reduced relative to neorealism proper, with the commentary on Italian society lightened by comedy, I will argue that these films are not simply anachronistic capitulations to the Christian Democrat administration or vulgar escapist products produced to draw Italian men to local theaters. Contrary to the assumption that pink neorealism is “rarely in tune with the social economic and political contemporary background [sic]” (Fournier Lanzoni 2008: 21), films like *Due soldi di speranza* scrutinize backward social mores and pervasive poverty in Southern Italy and criticize the postwar administration for its anachronistic policies and indifference to the difficulties facing Italian soldiers returning home after the war. Castellani’s post-neorealist project also documents the emerging crisis of traditional patriarchal society and the clash between the nation’s archaic, insular communities and the arrival of modernity. These films had a considerable impact on future comedies and were also essential to solidifying the national film industry in the postwar period to weather the threat of television and carry on into the years of the economic boom with the advent of the *commedia all’italiana* and the rise in popularity of Italy’s auteurs.

Despite the revolutionary stylistic and poetic innovations of cinematic neorealism, neorealist films did not entirely sever their ties from filmmaking under fascism nor were they immune to the influences of established genres. The prevalence of “elementi ‘comuni’” even in the masterworks of recognized neorealist directors creates one of the greatest obstacles in attempts to define neorealism, the movement’s “norm[e]” and deviations from those norms (Tinazzi 1979: 14). Many neorealist films utilize the conventions of genre cinema to appeal to audiences and

transmit political ideologies or call for social reforms. Alberto Lattuada's *Senza pietà* (1948) shows links to film noir and gangster movies and Pietro Germi's *Il cammino della speranza* (1950) is modeled on American westerns. In *Riso amaro* (1949) Giuseppe De Santis adeptly mixed neorealism with recognizable elements of Hollywood films, including musicals and gangster films, as well as aspects of popular culture, from *fotoromanzi* to American consumerism to create one of the more successful products in national theaters in the year of its release.²⁴ Although De Santis' film bears a specific message on the individualism and selfishness capitalism encourages to the detriment of collective responsibility, its long-term legacy is due more to the visual allure of Silvana Mangano than to its leftist ideology. The elements of comedy in films such as *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) are frequently mentioned in publications concerning neorealism and the history of the *commedia all'italiana*; neorealism was therefore a hybrid form that was closely related to contemporaneous popular cinema.²⁵ Renato Castellani's pivotal picture, *Due soldi di speranza*, is not so far removed from many of these critically acclaimed neorealist projects, films that were arguably "impure" forms of realism from the outset.

²⁴ *Riso amaro* was the sixth highest grossing film in 1949 (Celli and Cottino-Jones: 172).

²⁵ See, e.g., Bondanella (1993: 52-57), Marcus (1986: 42-44) and d'Amico (1985: 36-37).

ii. Rereading Pink Neorealism: *Due soldi di speranza* (1952)

Giovanni Leto, one of few scholars to argue for Renato Castellani's talent and the quality of his output on the whole, summarizes the critical bias against the director of *Due soldi di speranza*, the film commonly considered the inaugurator of pink neorealism, as follows:

Quasi tutta la critica ufficiale [. . .] lo ha sempre [. . .] accusato di bozzettismo, di carenze ideologiche, di superficialità edonistica, e ha addirittura con un vero e proprio arbitrio metodologico fatto risalire al regista la colpa di un certo cinema evasivo affermatosi in Italia negli anni Cinquanta sulle rovine del neorealismo. (1991: 297)

The lack of extended attention to Renato Castellani's postwar films following these debates on neorealism has caused many of these prejudices to persist in recent histories on Italian cinema.²⁶ Yet, even Guido Aristarco acknowledged the superiority of *Due soldi di speranza* in terms of the verisimilitude of the *bozzetti* relative to what he refers to as the "cascami" of neorealism, Comencini's *Pane, amore e fantasia* and Risi's *Poveri ma belli*, in an article first published in *Cinema nuovo* (1975: 741-46). Vittorio Spinazzola expresses a similar sentiment in dubbing Comencini's film a "falso rustico" when compared with Castellani's more accurate portrait of Southern Italy (1974: 105). But today *Due soldi di speranza's* legacy remains linked to pushing Italian cinema away from social concerns toward the

²⁶ Giovanni Leto's article in *Belfagor* and Sergio Trasatti's monograph (1984) are among the only recent studies of Castellani. Leto provides a list of publications pertaining to the director's work (1991: 314).

inoffensive arena of generational conflict (1974: 103). Frequently remembered as the work that started the “trend for facile picturesqueness” and served as a model for Comencini’s widely criticized *Pane, amore* series (Leprohon 1972: 121), a dearth of formal analysis of this landmark film has obscured Castellani’s investigation of the social mores and specifically historical and cultural conditions that inhibit the pursuit of well-being of young Italians following the end of the war.

Castellani’s postwar projects adumbrate certain films of the *commedia all’italiana*, in particular those that investigate repressive moral codes and mores in force in Southern Italy and highlight the ridiculousness of anachronistic laws still in effect, such as the one that gave reduced sentences for murders that were considered honor killings (i.e., the films of Pietro Germi). In *Due soldi di speranza* Castellani adeptly blends neorealist cinematographic techniques, most notably aspects of Luchino Visconti’s style from *La terra trema* (1948), with skills he learned as an assistant to Mario Camerini on some of the most popular comedies of the 1930s. Castellani created a hybrid that resonated with popular audiences, unlike *La terra trema*, and still offered a portrait of the South that laid bare the issues that made life particularly difficult in the years following the war.

Contrary to the association of *neorealismo rosa* with escapist entertainment, Castellani’s film does not shy from denouncing widespread poverty and the lack of employment opportunities after the end of the war, nor from critiquing the backwardness of the social mores that restrict the mobility of young Italians living in rural parts of Southern Italy. Antonio and Carmela’s love story, central to *Due soldi di speranza*’s plot, the protagonist’s optimism, and playful comic gags render an

otherwise fierce condemnation of the adverse effects of rigid patriarchy, the inflexibility of the representatives of the Church, and the insensitivity of the authorities more palatable to postwar audiences and more acceptable to the increasingly vigilant Ufficio Centrale and its censorship committees.²⁷ In spite of the fact that the film revisits certain tropes associated with classic comedy, namely the obstacle to the young protagonist's goal of marriage created by opposition of the love interest's father, an aspect of the plot which led certain critics to decry a return of traditional comedy along the lines of the "white telephone" films of the 1930s, the barriers in *Due soldi di speranza* are demonstrated to be not so easily overcome. The expected "happy" ending is attainable only through a renunciation of the value system upheld in the small town of Cusano, and therefore there is ultimately no satisfactory integration into society as it stands. Furthermore, the fate of Antonio's sister, Giuliana, her forced marriage to the lecherous Luigi Bellomo, functions as a counterpoint to Antonio and Carmela's future union, thus making it clear that their devil-may-care defiance of accepted norms is an anomaly and that few young Italians in a similar situation would actually be able to surmount the cultural and familial pressures the film identifies.

In *Due soldi di speranza*, a young man named Antonio Catalano returns home after the end of the war to his mother and siblings in a provincial town outside of Naples. In a context of poverty and pervasive unemployment worsened by the

²⁷ *Due soldi di speranza* obtained a relatively trouble-free *nulla osta* from the Ufficio Centrale, but the censors did insist on cutting a significant line from the film that references the lack of freedom it targets. In the original version Antonio expresses his frustration by exclaiming, "Io metterò al mondo una quarantina di figli, che riusciranno a gridare ciò che non ho potuto gridare io" (Argentieri 1974: 98).

events of recent history, Antonio has trouble finding work, and his family situation is dire given the absence of a father to share the fiscal burden. Antonio takes up a number of modest positions throughout the course of the film, from helping sell vegetables at the local market to assisting the carriage drivers in making the arduous journey to and from the closest train station to Naples. His need for steady work increases when the mutual affection between Carmela and Antonio is made known to her father Pasquale, a quick-tempered fireworks vendor; he opposes their union because Antonio cannot secure a permanent job. Further complications arise when a relatively wealthy older man named Luigi Bellomo seduces Antonio's sister Giuliana while he is away seeking employment in Naples. Unwilling to carry out an honor killing to satisfy his mother's wishes, Antonio is forced to mediate between the two families and procure the funds for an adequate dowry. Antonio finds and loses additional jobs, including work as a handyman for the local church and employment in a small network of movie theaters in Naples. In an act of desperation and defiance, Antonio and Carmela, frustrated by their situation, ultimately renounce their ties to Carmela's family and optimistically bank on a more positive future that by the end of the film has yet to show any sign of materializing.

Giovanni Leto believes that *Due soldi di speranza* provides an "affectionate portrait" of Southern Italians (1991: 304), aligning Castellani's film with other pink neorealist products that view traditional, rural society and its resistance to modernization and change in a positive light. For Peter Bondanella, it is a "pleasant" movie that is "based upon endless episodes employing comic gags and local color" in which "the only real link to the neorealist tradition to be found in it is the director's

authentic locations and his interest in retaining the flavor of regional dialect” (2004: 88-89). Although Castellani imparts an endearing quality to some of the more prominent characters in the film, namely Antonio, Giuliana, Carmela and her mother, the director foregrounds the defects and vices of virtually everyone else, from the local priest to the representatives of the police force in Naples. This is most clear in the depiction of Giacomina, Antonio’s mother.

Maurizio Grande observes that Castellani “Disegna con asprezza il personaggio della madre di Antonio, che racchiude in sé tutti i vizi di un furbesco adattamento alla miseria,” and throughout the film she demonstrates “una agghiacciante assenza di scrupoli morali” (2003: 135). Yet, her complete lack of morals is not only due to an adaptation to long-standing poverty, but also to an obsessive preoccupation with protecting the image of the family, a mindset conditioned by traditional attitudes towards issues such as family honor and the cult of virginity. Alberto Cattini comments that the film is marked by “Personaggi mobili e vivi [. . .] avvolti da una comicità che rivela la realtà e i valori che la reggono” (2002: 11). Castellani’s close scrutiny of local customs and social mores in the rural South targets the absurdity of the dominant value system and the injurious comportment it elicits. *Due soldi di speranza* therefore condemns the suffocating effects of this traditional society on the personal fulfillment of the town’s inhabitants; but through Antonio’s trips to and from Naples, the film also draws attention to issues facing the nation as a whole during the reconstruction and ultimately suggests that not only optimism, but greater understanding and

cooperation among Italians, both in the countryside and in urban centers, is needed to change society for the better.

The statement that opens Castellani's film establishes an obvious connection to the neorealist movement at the outset and situates Antonio and Carmela's struggle in a specific geographic and historical context. The intertitles offer a word of thanks to the people and locations of Boscotrecase for their integral part in the production, thus laying claim to an authenticity of setting that differs from the fictional town of Sagliena in which the action of Luigi Comencini's *Pane, amore e fantasia* and its sequel unfolds. In words that echo *La terra trema*'s description of Acitrezza and its environs, including the name of the closest metropolitan area and a readily identifiable geographic landmark, the text asserts that *Due soldi di speranza* is set in a provincial town "alle falde del Vesuvio presso Napoli" and introduces one of the film's central concerns: the relationship between the modern city and the traditional practices of the small town referred to as Cusano in the film.²⁸ Whereas Comencini's *pane e amore* films offer a more nostalgic take on life in the countryside through an idealized, fictional locale with no direct relationship to an urban center, Castellani's film treats the "persistence" of an antiquated value system that is threatened by the approach of modernism through Antonio's trips to and from the city of Naples (Tinazzi 2003: 246). As we shall see, neither the modern city nor the old-fashioned, rural village offers a propitious environment for a young man with a

²⁸ The declaration that begins *La terra trema* includes the following: "I fatti rappresentati in questo film accadono in Italia, e precisamente in Sicilia, nel paese di Acitrezza, che si trova sul mare Ionio a poca distanza da Catania."

positive outlook and a strong work ethic seeking to start his own family after the war's end.

Castellani's most obvious point of reference in terms of aesthetic style is Luchino Visconti. The camerawork in *Due soldi di speranza* is noticeably inspired by the manner in which Visconti shoots the fishing village of Aci Trezza in *La terra trema*. The similarity is most evident in intricate shots featuring deep-focus photography with multiple planes of action through doorframes and windows as well as around corners and through alleyways in the public spaces of the small town of Cusano. Henry Bacon observes that in *La terra trema* "often the characters are framed by doors, windows, mirrors and the like" which "define social spheres and indicate limits" (1998: 46). In *Due soldi di speranza* Antonio, Carmela, and Giuliana are frequently boxed in by architectural features that set up various boundaries and contrasts, such as the frame divided by the doorway that differentiates Antonio's personal belief system from that of his mother, or the daily life of Giuliana limited to activities traditionally assigned to women within the walls of the domestic space and effectively demonstrated by a camera that highlights her isolation and confinement by juxtaposing the interior of the home with the world outside. The partitioning of space and the divergent planes of action delineate essential categories in the film, such as the opposition between the public and the private realms, or the different worldview of the protagonists with respect to the prevailing attitudes and beliefs in Cusano.

In reference to *Due soldi di speranza's* cinematography, Alberto Cattini notes that "Edifici, piazze, chiesa, strade, sono ripresi di sguincio, e l'obliquità sembra

alludere al disagio esistenziale dei poveri” (2002: 19). The “oblique” shooting style adds a disconcerting atmosphere that conflicts with certain upbeat elements of the film, such as the love intrigue, Antonio’s jovial attitude, and the often cheerful musical score, the features that many critics feel compromises *Due soldi di speranza*’s polemic. The restricted space in the profilmic world, skewed camera angles and symbolic obstructions serve to undermine an unequivocally positive reading of quotidian life in the provinces in and around Naples. Not only does this crooked camerawork refer to the dejection of the poor, as Alberto Cattini suggests, but it also alludes to the film’s indictment of a host of negative aspects of life in traditional, rural communities in the South. The stylistic choice to film streets, piazzas, and facades of buildings at an angle suggests an antagonistic relationship between the town and its inhabitants, for the open spaces are often malevolent territories in which the central characters must be wary of harmful rumors, gossip and public opinion while navigating through them. The cinematography embodies Castellani’s statement on the crooked, anachronistic worldview upheld by the community in this provincial town. His deliberate deployment of figurative cinematography, the oblique camera angles and visual obstructions, conflicts with the reassuring and readily identifiable cinematic language of traditional film comedy (i.e., Hollywood comedies and “white telephone” films) and communicates that *Due soldi di speranza* is anything but a simple story of integration or a facile, escapist romance.

Due soldi di speranza insistently features symbolic barriers, such as closed doors, iron gates and stone walls, in the mise-en-scène in Cusano and the

surrounding area. This visual motif serves multiple functions: it represents the impediments to Antonio and Carmela's goal of marriage in the plot of the overarching love story; it embodies the film's underlying critique of the institutions and the restrictive codes that determine acceptable behavior for the town's inhabitants; and it references the postwar administration's failure to address contradictory policies still in effect, such as the laws concerning internal migration, that impede young men like Antonio from finding gainful employment in other parts of the peninsula. The film explicitly alludes to the threat of imprisonment at multiple points: first, when Antonio speaks with the marshal in the barracks about the paucity of work options and he warns of the punishment for thievery; then later when speaking with his mother about his unwillingness to go through with an honor killing that would also place him behind bars. The snares and impediments to personal fulfillment are plentiful in Cusano, and the film's symbolism implies that they amount to more than the simple generational conflict or social status common in traditional forms of comedy.

Noa Steimatsky notes that "While interiors are rarely entirely closed in *La terra trema*, in that they so often incorporate adjacent spaces, exterior spaces are never quite open but always circumscribed within a range of enframing elements themselves emphatically enclosed by the film frame" (2008: 110). This also holds true in *Due soldi di speranza*: the exteriors in Castellani's film are always presented with lines of trees, conspicuous groupings of cacti, rock formations, stone walls and the like that deny uninhibited views of an expansive landscape. Steimatsky explains these "enframing elements" in *La terra trema* in terms of Visconti's "dominating

artistic will, a vision that grasps [the landscape] as ready material for its own use in a theatrical chorale” (2008: 110). Castellani achieves an original aesthetic that draws from Visconti through meticulous control of outdoor cinematography. In *Due soldi di speranza* these hemmed-in images contribute to the sense of confinement that permeates Cusano as well as the surrounding countryside from beginning to end.

The scenes in which Antonio heads to and from Naples by train from the nearby station are among the most eloquent examples of figurative enclosure in *Due soldi di speranza*. A more conventional film might allude to distance and departure by depicting the train tracks head on as the train disappears, heading towards a destination beyond the horizon. In Antonio’s visits to the train station, the camera lingers on the tracks and the stones on the ground from a high angle, thus denying a full view of the train or a panorama of the surrounding landscape. When the camera does show the train, it is shot from an oblique angle and a portion of the station or a line of trees squeezes the frame. Antonio leaves Cusano for Naples multiple times by train only to inevitably return. Castellani hints at Antonio’s desire to leave his hometown with Carmela, but the film provides a long list of reasons, from familial obligations to the nation’s laws on internal migration, that prohibit him from doing so.

Due soldi di speranza shares *La terra trema*’s attention to the importance of social class and wealth in determining the viability of marriage in the South. The narrator in Visconti’s film explains that “anche le vicende del cuore a Trezza sono legate al lavoro e alla prosperità,” and the unsatisfying conclusions of both ‘Ntoni’s

courtship of Nedda and Mara's relationship with Nicola demonstrate how fiscal difficulties and small differences in social status take precedence over sentiments in Aci Trezza. The same traditional attitudes towards marriage, including the importance of family approval and gainful employment as crucial factors in dictating the feasibility of a union, hold true in the provincial town of Cusano outside of Naples. The procurement of an acceptable dowry is an essential part of the completion of the reparatory marriage between Luigi Bellomo and Giuliana, nuptials arranged to defend the interests of the two families involved. According to Maurizio Grande, the institution of marriage in *Due soldi di speranza* functions first and foremost as a business transaction, a socially and economically favorable "occasion," for personal connections and love are only secondary and certainly not guaranteed (2003: 131-32).

Bellomo, a relatively wealthy landowner and proprietor of the local market, lives in the most spacious home we see in the film, filled with an abundance of cured meats and foodstuffs hanging from the ceiling. The gap in wealth between the Catalanos and the Bellomos is first established in the scene in which Luigi is introduced at the market in Cusano. While Antonio works frenetically to sell fresh produce during one of many temporary jobs he holds during the course of the film, Luigi sits casually off to one side of the market and counts a thick wad of money. This medium shot of Bellomo situated among green beans and leafy vegetables communicates that he has no trouble obtaining food for himself and for his mother who we later meet when Antonio visits his home, yet Giuliana's future mother-in-law is still eager to take advantage of Giacomina's desperation and greedily

demands a significant dowry from the Catalanos when the priest mediates between Bellomo's mother and Giacomina in the local church.

The narration in *Due soldi di speranza*, a blend of documentary and popular influences, both attests to Castellani's neorealist lineage and ensures the intelligibility of the plot. Like Visconti's narrator in *La terra trema*, Castellani's voice-over is delivered in standard Italian that contrasts with the regional specificity of the language spoken by the film's protagonists. The unidentified commentator in *Due soldi di speranza* offers factual information on the town and the local geography consistent with the conventions of documentaries as well as details on the progression of Antonio and Carmela's individual story. His remarks on the topography between the town and the closest train station point out the difficulty of the steep journey due to Boscotrecase's specific location and the late arrival of modernization in parts of the southern countryside. Seven men with seven horse-drawn carriages make the trek back and forth between Boscotrecase and the distant station. The matter-of-factness in the delivery of the narrator's lines in *Due soldi di speranza* contrasts with the melancholy tone of the voice-over in *La terra trema*; the literary effect, with heavy use of metaphor to communicate the Valastro family's downfall and the fatalistic message of Visconti's project permeates his language.

In an interview with Sergio Trasatti, Castellani states that he often uses narrators in his films to communicate effectively with spectators: "Il ricorso a un narratore (voce fuori campo) che interpreta praticamente il ruolo dell'autore semplifica il processo informativo [. . .]" (cit. in Trasatti 1984: 5). Federica Villa compares the voice-overs in *Due soldi di speranza* to the captions in *fotoromanzi* that

plainly explain or elaborate on the meaning of the images. She links the narration to various forms of popular media after the war, including illustrated magazines, radio and the future arrival of television (2003: 245-46). The specific details that provide insight on the development of the love story between Carmela and Antonio are reminiscent of illustrated magazines, but the narrator's dialogue also contributes to the comic effect of the film. For example, at one point the narrator ironically states that the small bus Antonio and the carriage drivers purchase in a cooperative effort is almost new when the images on screen indicate quite the opposite, for the vehicle we see is dilapidated and barely functional. His statements also contribute to the film's polemical stance on certain issues: for example, when Antonio runs into difficulty with the Neapolitan authorities, the narrator explains the fact that Antonio is treated as a *forestiero* to spell out the inimical relationship between the city and countryside and the prejudice against rural Italians encouraged by the law on internal migration. The narration in *Due soldi di speranza* therefore serves a number of purposes, including enhancing the intelligibility of the plot, providing geographic and historic particulars as in documentary practice, and by becoming at times a comic mechanism or a means of polemic.

Castellani's deployment of cinematic realism approaches the grotesque in the casting choices and representation of certain characters in *Due soldi di speranza*. Despite the fact that neorealism is known for the use of non-professional actors and an unadorned aesthetic style, most neorealist directors carefully chose their protagonists and often sacrificed a degree of verisimilitude in favor of countenances

that would not entirely betray audience expectations for attractiveness on screen.²⁹ In the film's first sequence, Castellani establishes his connection to postwar realist cinema but also draws attention to neorealism's frequent consolation to spectators by introducing his film with a number of characters that jarringly conflict with notions of cinematic beauty. Antonio's mother Giacomina is overweight, visibly aged, and missing most of her teeth. Her outward aspect combines with her many foibles, including blatant dishonesty, a propensity toward gambling, and gullibility, to make her one of the film's most consistent sources of comic entertainment. The other older ladies, presumably members of the extended Catalano family, shown with her at the beginning of the film are equally unpleasant in appearance. One of them is marked by an abundance of hair on her upper lip and another is jarringly masculine. One can discern the influence of these unsightly but comic characters on certain grotesque figures in the future *commedia all'italiana*, such as Nino Badalamenti's mutilated father in Lattuada's *Mafioso* (1962) and Fefé's wife, Rosalia, with her unsightly mustache in *Divorzio all'italiana* (1961).

One of the targets of *Due soldi di speranza's* satire is the significant element of theatricality underpinning quotidian life in the provincial town of Cusano. Corrado Alvaro, in a review of the film published in *Mondo*, links this theatricality to the influence of the *commedia dell'arte* and the longstanding tradition of regional comic theater and its stock characters (qtd. in Brunetta 2009: 87). The histrionic

²⁹ E.g., Vittorio De Sica decided to substitute Franco Interlenghi and Rinaldo Smordoni for Cappellone and Scimmietta, the street urchins that inspired *Sciuscià* (1946), because they were "too ugly, almost deformed" (qtd. in Faldini and Fofi 1979: 113), and Luchino Visconti clearly took appearance into account when choosing the members of the Valastro family among the locals in Acì Trezza for *La terra trema*.

performances of many of the town's inhabitants factor into both the film's appeal as comic entertainment and into its critique of the moral codes that govern the actions of those living in archaic southern Italian villages like Cusano.

Antonio's mother is the most obvious example of this sort of caricature in *Due soldi di speranza*. The humorous portrayal of her returning home to greet Antonio, with wild gesticulations and expressions of excitement in dialect, plays off of the stereotype of the doting Italian mother. Yet, Castellani's portrayals of many of the central figures are not simply limited to superficial approximations of conventional images, but also uncover the belief systems and traditions that shape their comportment. Maintaining a respectable family reputation and keeping up appearances is demonstrated to be paramount to the inhabitants of Cusano, in particular to characters such as Antonio's mother and Carmela's father.

Theatricality is essential to preserve this public image, and many of the comic sequences involving Giacomina mock the great lengths she goes to in order to sustain an air of respectability in town. Giacomina is the clearest manifestation of the damaging effects of the traditional value system and local customs on the inhabitants of Cusano. Alberto Cattini erroneously claims that she confuses her lies with reality and bends the truth with everyone (2002: 10), but in fact her actions and words are carefully calculated in order to manipulate a given situation for her own benefit, according to beliefs that stem from backward social mores and traditional prejudices. The *commedia all'italiana* adopts the theme of theatricality, both in satirical representations of honor and the family in the South in Pietro Germi

films, and in the absurdity of the behavior of the middle classes, politicians, church representatives, lawyers, etc., accompanying the economic boom.³⁰

The scene in which Giacomina blatantly lies to a police officer about how she acquired the rabbit that she stole for a meal to celebrate Antonio's return is a prime example of her comportment. This anecdote near the beginning of the film introduces a number of characteristics of daily life in Cusano that *Due soldi di speranza* mocks. The mother's distrust of the authorities is indicative of her support of the tradition of *omertà* whereby silence or falsification is preferable to cooperation with outsiders. Guiliana is mortified by the police presence in their home and voices her concern over what the townspeople will think of a family of "disonesti," therefore demonstrating the importance of protecting the family name from potential damage caused by gossip and hearsay. Antonio suggests to the officer that he pay the fine and give the sum to the victim of the theft; his insistence on honesty demonstrates that his personal moral code is different from that of his mother. The defense of the family and the opposition between the private space of the Catalano home and the town of Cusano is synthesized in the shot of Antonio holding his mother that is framed by the doorway. One can discern the Viscontian influence in this frame within a frame containing an additional mounted family picture in the background of the composition. Here the photograph suggests a long-standing Catalano history and Antonio's new role as the patriarch and guardian of the household given the absence of his father.

³⁰ E.g., the elaborate spectacles Don Vincenzo orchestrates to relay intended messages to the townspeople and manipulate public opinion in the defense of the Ascalone family name in *Sedotta e abbandonata*.

The intertitles in the beginning of Visconti's *La terra trema* state that "La lingua italiana non è in Sicilia la lingua dei poveri," and Castellani's film shows that it is not the language of the poor in Naples and the surrounding area either. The expressive, relatively authentic language plays an integral part in *Due soldi di speranza's* verisimilitude and in its appeal as comic entertainment. The dialogue, referred to as a "napoletano universale" by Sergio Trasatti because it consists of regionally specific pronunciation and diction that is still readily intelligible to Italians across the peninsula (1984: 57), surpasses other pink neorealist projects in its authenticity. During the scene in which Antonio speaks with the marshal in the local office of the Carabinieri after he returns from the war, the representative of the military police chastises him for not picking up standard Italian despite the fact that he spent eleven months in the city during his period of service. Antonio's response draws attention to how alien the artificial language modeled largely on Tuscan literary Italian is to his own patois: "Signor Maresciallo, se volessi toscaneggià, farei la figura del fesso, invece quando parlo il dialetto mio mi capisco." Other characteristics of his pronunciation and diction, from the use of the Neapolitan term *guaglione* to regional verb forms such as the first person singular of the verb *sapere* (i.e., *saccio*), connects Antonio's manner of speaking to a specific geographic area and popular social class. Language, in addition to the vast differences between the North and South and the city and the countryside, points to the fragmentary nature of the nation in the aftermath of the war and constitutes one of many barriers to social and geographic mobility that the film uncovers.

Although the critique of the Church in Castellani's film is not as vitriolic as that of Monicelli's in *Totò e Carolina*, one can identify the presence of the "spirito laico" that the Tuscan director associates with Italian style comedy in the link between the damaging social mores in Cusano and Catholic ideology (Mondadori 2005: 36), the ridiculousness of the clergy's unfounded prejudices, and a satirical take on the Church's chief representative in town. The priest's life of relative luxury and his lethargy are played up at a number of points in the film, for example when he is shown strolling through the church grounds with an ostentatious parasol or during the scene in which he is seated in a chair in the shade, fanning himself with what appears to be a feather duster. When the priest interacts with the townspeople, he is visibly irked and often condescending. The local priest mediates between Antonio's mother and Luigi Bellomo's mother in order to arrange Giuliana's marriage, but he functions as more of a "parroco-notaio" than a pacifier in determining the particulars of the dowry (Grande 2003: 135-36), and the grim ceremony that follows as a result of it can hardly be considered an admirable achievement.

The film criticizes the Church's unfounded demonization of communism in the scene when the priest fires Antonio from his post as a handyman because he has been working clandestinely for the party in Naples at night to make money to set aside for his future with Carmela. The head of the local church considers neither the paucity of work available in town nor gives Antonio a chance for forgiveness when he callously orders his assistant, Rosario, to eject him from his quarters. His acrimonious command, "Buttalo fuori! Fuori!" is hardly consistent with the Christian

concept of charity. A medium close-up of the portly priest eating comfortably at his desk points out what the loss of the job means to Antonio. The mise-en-scène of the shot of the reverend underscores the irony in his comportment: while he enjoys a large bowl of soup and a loaf of bread donning clerical garb with a white tablecloth tucked under his chin, he is indifferent to Antonio's situation and to the family that depends on his meager pay for sustenance. The priest's secure position and the lifestyle it affords in Cusano hardly permits an understanding of the plight of the impoverished townspeople.

The most conspicuous appearance of Catholic iconography in *Due soldi di speranza* is the large statue of Christ on the cross on the wall during Antonio's conversation with the marshal in his office in the barracks shortly after he returns to town. He meets with the head of the military police force in order to obtain a signature to officially complete his period of service and to inquire about help in finding some form of employment. The composition of the frame in the shot of the office after Antonio enters is dominated by Christ on the cross, with the marshal seated at the desk below and slouching in his chair, hinting at the primacy of the Church over the local authorities as well as the close relationship between the Church and the conservative elements of the postwar republic.

Antonio's question about work prospects and the marshal's dismissive response and obvious irritation over it suggests the government's failure to provide adequate support or work opportunities for veterans, especially in the South:

ANTONIO. Signor maresciallo, io aggio servito il governo per undici mesi abbondanti. Mi potete aiutare a trovare un lavoro?

MARESCIALLO. Tutti voialtri militari mi venite con questa suonata!

ANTONIO. Signor maresciallo, per cambiare la suonata,

abbisognerebbe cambiare 'o direttore, no i musicanti.

The sequence criticizes the dominant forces in postwar politics and suggests the need for new ideas and changes in leadership. When taken into consideration alongside the marshal's comments on Antonio's failure to pick up the standardized form of Italian held dear by Mussolini's regime, Castellani hints that the necessary alteration of the nation stems from a disconcerting continuity between Italy under fascism and the new republic. When the marshal expresses his concern over Antonio's "ideas," the young veteran's disingenuous reply contains an implicit critique of the fact that talk of change or an expression of dissent is dangerous in a small town kept under the watchful eye of the Church and the local authorities: "State tranquillo, signor maresciallo ch'io sono 'nu buono guaglione e lo sacco che le idée in testa non ne debbo tenere." Castellani, well aware of the growing threat of censorship to any and all forms of *cinema impegnato* by the early fifties, partly veils dissatisfaction with Italian institutions through Antonio's careful retort to the local authorities that nonetheless betrays a degree of frustration with the situation as it currently stands. The scene in the marshal's office points to the conservative elements in postwar Italy, firmly rooted in the South, that discourage open political debate and stymie efforts to change the status quo.

Carmela makes her first appearance at the end of the scene in which Antonio and the other local men wait listlessly in the piazza by the church. The separation of the young ladies from the men according to local custom and the rigid categories

assigned to men and women in the Catholic tradition, adamantly defended by the Church during the postwar period from the threat of modernity and Americanization, is reflected by the camera's distance and the composition of the frame when Carmela looks in the direction of the protagonist. Carmela spies Antonio from the corner of a street on the opposite side of the piazza with a group of younger girls; the men are shown in long shot on the right and the women in medium shot on the left. The frame, divided vertically by the corner of the building around which Carmela peers, and the gate by the church that the men lean against in the distance, point to the root cause of the partitioning of the sexes: the teachings of the Catholic Church and its support of a traditional patriarchal society, the cult of virginity and its effect on opportunities for mingling of the sexes in public spaces. For this reason, the young protagonists frequently meet in the countryside on the edge of town where they are able to interact more freely.

In reference to the relative weight of the male and female protagonists, Sergio Trasatti observes that *Due soldi di speranza* "Fa perno sul personaggio maschile [. . .] ma sostanzialmente rientra in quei non pochi film di Castellani dove la donna svolge un ruolo emblematico" (1984: 57). The film affirms the growing importance of women in Italian cinema in the 1950s, a decade in which female characters frequently assumed roles as central protagonists and often equaled or took precedence over their male counterparts. This trend began with the rebirth of Italian cinema after World War II, signaled by Anna Magnani's Pina in *Roma città aperta*, the decisive break with the tradition of passive roles for women in films made under Fascism. The postwar period marked the beginning of a long process of

female emancipation, and by the 1950s women expressed themselves more freely than they had in the past.

With “the development of modern fashion, the massive use of feminine imagery in advertising and the availability of cosmetics” young women became increasingly visible and placed greater emphasis on appearance than they had in the past (Gundle 2007: 127). Carmela’s comportment and style of dress evince the dissemination of modern influences across the peninsula after the end of the war and the resistance of the traditional Southern Italian society to these new styles and the independence it encourages. When Carmela visits the beauty shop to cut her traditional braids and perm her hair in the hope of attracting Antonio’s attention, the walls of the locale are filled with advertisements and images of glamorous women donning modern apparel cut from popular magazines that attest to the incipient emphasis on beauty and style as a means of personal expression. The stylist possesses the latest in gadgetry; Carmela is seated next to a complex series of tubes and lamps presumably used for perms and coloring. As Carmela gets up to leave the shop, she checks her appearance in the mirror, a sign of a newfound concern for appearance and the passage from childhood to adulthood. Up until this point, Carmela is shown with the other young girls; afterwards she is independent, often navigating Cusano or attending to her work on her own. Carmela’s wardrobe in the film consists of light colors and flower print dresses and contrasts sharply with Antonio’s sister, Giuliana, and the older women in town who wear austere, black garments with veils over their heads. Carmela’s attire is indicative of her resistance to traditional notions of acceptable behavior for women in the South, an

issue that causes much of the tension between her and her father, Pasquale, a stubborn representative of old-fashioned gender roles and family structure.

On the other hand, Antonio's sister Giuliana is a prototypical product of the reigning code of conduct for unmarried Italian women. She is listless, always dressed in black, including during her clandestine wedding to Luigi Bellomo, and largely confined to walls of the Catalano family home. Giuliana is often shown sewing just inside the doorframe, separated from the world outside. She does not share Antonio's gregariousness or optimism, as demonstrated by her pessimistic thoughts on his employment prospects after his return home. Giuliana's slow movement and reserved nature contrasts with sprightly Carmela and her frequent flights from Cusano against her parent's wishes. The film communicates that Giuliana longs to live differently in moments when she gazes beyond the limits of the domestic space, but she has grown accustomed to isolation to avert the predatory products of the cult of virginity like Luigi Bellomo and the prying eyes and malevolent gossip of the townspeople. The damaging effects of the local social mores in relation to the options available to young women for personal fulfillment are manifested in Giuliana's outlook and demeanor. She is the most obvious victim in *Due soldi di speranza* of the lack of freedom afforded to women in traditional Southern communities like Cusano, and serves as a younger counterpart to Carmela's mother Maria Rosa, "la moglie serva, la madre succube, che mai o quasi osa prendere la parola" in the Artù home for fear of her tyrannical husband (Cattini 2002: 10).

The brief scene that follows the agreement between Giacomina and Bellomo's mother concerning Giuliana's marriage in the church constitutes one of the film's strongest statements on Giuliana's situation as a woman in Cusano. The camera frames her in medium close-up while she sews outside in the sun in one of the only instances in which Giuliana is shown outdoors. She hears the church bells chime and looks up toward the sky with a forlorn expression on her face; here the sound emanating from the bell tower functions as a knell, a reminder of the inevitable marriage that will seal her unhappy end with Luigi Bellomo, and also implicates the Church for its support of reparatory marriages. Giuliana's sister warns her of someone coming and advises that she get inside: "Sta attento che passa gente. Il sole lo prenderai quando sarai maritata." The viewer understands the irony in her statement, as little sun will reach Giuliana after the gloomy ceremony. Castellani takes care to contrast deep shadow from the outside wall and in the doorway of the Catalano family home with the reference her sister makes to the sun. The passerby is in fact Carmela, the female counterpoint to Giuliana, singing happily and wearing a lightly colored flower print dress, whose appearance and demeanor conflicts with Giuliana and her sister. Castellani juxtaposes Giuliana, the sacrificial victim of the cult of virginity and the traditional code of conduct for women, with Carmela, a product of the new wind of change accompanying the reconstruction and the years leading up to the economic boom.

Carmela's mistreatment at the hands of her father, Pasquale Artù, is a recurring motif in *Due soldi di speranza*. The first instance of this violence occurs after Carmela cuts her hair in order to impress Antonio. Pasquale slaps her for

defying his authority by acting without permission. Her attempt to assert her individuality is unacceptable to her overbearing father. In each and every domestic scene that takes place in the Artù household, Carmela is either physically or verbally abused by Pasquale. His trade as a fireworks vendor metaphorically represents his explosive temper and unpredictable, violent outbursts. Pasquale's brutality is linked directly to the domestic space in the first scene in which he appears when a firework goes off inside the Artù home. Although the abuse is often treated comically, for example when Carmela sings in response to a slap following the father's brutal threat to knock her out cold if she happens to be lying to him, the persistence of the ill-treatment and the unusual emphasis on this domestic violence for a film made in the early 1950s makes a novel statement on the harmful effects of unchecked patriarchal dominance. Carmela's irascible father Pasquale is an obvious model for memorable characters from the future *commedia all'italiana*, most notably the outrageous Vincenzo Ascalone (played by Saro Urzì) in Germi's *Sedotta e abbandonata*. Germi's frequent use of metaphors, such as with the steam whistle on the train or the explosion at the mine, to gauge Vincenzo's temper most likely draw from Pasquale's fireworks.

The scene in which Carmela is shown chained to her bed with studded leg cuffs as punishment for sneaking out to figure out where Antonio has been going at night provides an obvious comment on Carmela's status as a young girl in a traditional home environment. Carmela's treatment as an animal is made clear when she barks like a dog in response to her mother's pleas to tell her father where she has been. Much like other moments in which Pasquale strikes his daughter,

Carmela sings in order to cope with this inhuman form of discipline. The comic tone of many of the abuse scenes lightens the asperity of Castellani's critique and most likely helped the film avoid issues with censorship that had already begun to threaten contemporaneous national productions, but the message delivered by likening Carmela's treatment to that of a domestic animal is clear despite the fact that it is paired with humor. In this sequence the comedy is incongruous with unsettling elements of the *mise-en-scène*, including the darkness of the room, the prominent sullied bedpan in the corner of the frame and the small glass of water that has most likely been Carmela's only food or drink since she was first shackled to the bedpost. *Due soldi di speranza* provides an uncommon caricature of the violent, abusive patriarch and a statement on the position of women in the 1950s that proves that comic portrayals of contentious issues do not entirely obscure the impact of the social commentary.

One of *Due soldi di speranza's* central concerns is the notion of family honor in the South and the harm it causes to those expected to defend it. In *Love Italian Style*, Gabriella Parca provides an explanation of the term that sheds light on a number of aspects of Castellani's film:

[. . .] in the South of Italy a woman is valued above all for her virginity before marriage, and for her fidelity afterwards. The result is the concept of 'honor.' Its defense rests exclusively on the woman and its loss represents a stain on the reputation of the entire family which is then considered (and considers itself) disgraced. This disgrace must then be avenged by a brutal sort of magic ritual known as 'the crime of

honor' [. . .] A somewhat less cruel version of this ritual is the forced marriage between the guilty woman and her seducer when possible.

(1966: 19-20)

Honor influences the lives of the inhabitants of Cusano in a variety of ways. It is the primary reason for Giuliana's concealment in the home, a form of protection against the predatory men in town and a means of limiting potential for rumors about her activities. Men and children frequently occupy public spaces throughout the course of the film, whereas women are rarely visible roaming the streets of Cusano. Honor can also threaten masculinity by way of expectations to defend the family name.

As soon as Antonio returns from Naples, a man from town informs him of the rumor that Luigi Bellomo dishonored his sister during his absence. Antonio's mother hints that she expects Antonio to vindicate his sister and the family by killing Bellomo. Unlike Pietro Germi's *Sedotta e abbandonata*, in *Due soldi di speranza* there is no tyrannical patriarch to force Antonio to do the deed, and the young protagonist's own moral code takes priority over the bloody end made acceptable by an antiquated concept of honor:

MADRE. Spero che abbia fatto buon viaggio.

ANTONIO. So già tutto.

MADRE. Non sei nemmeno arrivato e già sai tutto? Ma che paese

sciaugurato! Paese fetente! Vogliono far succedere i guai!

Vogliono far succedere gli omicidi! Sì, sì, omicidi, omicidi!

ANTONIO. Solo questo ci mancasse, fare vent'anni in galera.

MADRE. Ma come? Non saresti capace di uccidere quell'infame
scellerato di Luigi Bellomo per salvare l'onore di tua sorella?

ANTONIO. Io no.

MADRE. Ah!

The mother's exaggerated, theatrical performance in this scene, in addition to Antonio's nonchalant response expressing unwillingness to take Luigi's life to save face, makes for one of the most comic exchanges in the film. Part of the joke here is that Giacomina is frustrated over the fact that the quick spread of gossip in town has made it more difficult for Antonio to claim the mitigating circumstance of having acted in the moment in which he first discovered the affront to Giuliana and his family according to the Codice Rocco (art. 587).³¹ Pietro Germi's grotesque Italian style comedy *Divorzio all'italiana* focuses expressly on this absurd article of law and the way in which the calculating Ferdinando Cefalù (Marcello Mastroianni) manipulates it to his advantage. Antonio is skeptical of this old-fashioned code of conduct and he refuses to even consider the option of an honor killing as a solution to Giuliana's "impiccio" with Luigi Bellomo. He prefers Gabriella Parca's alternative for saving the family name, the forced marriage, for he has no intention of harming Luigi or spending part his life behind bars. The camera carefully divides the frame in this scene to delineate the opposition between Antonio's views and his mother's by way of the doorframe, but also the conflict between the family and the general opinion of the townspeople beyond the domestic space that the film alludes to when the mother briefly steps beyond the door to denounce the "paese fetente." Although

³¹ Art. 587 was ultimately repealed in 1981. For a detailed history of honor killings and adultery law in Italy, see Cantarella (1991).

he will choose the less violent option by seeking out Bellomo at his home on the edge of town to demand that he marry Giuliana, Antonio is hardly pleased by the result and declines to shake Luigi's hand after the ceremony, suggesting that the new generation of Southern Italians may challenge the acceptance of abhorrent solutions to the loss of virginity outside of wedlock.

Despite the fact that *Due soldi di speranza* is typically remembered as a film about love, Carmela and Antonio's genuine affection for one another is shown to be an anomaly in Cusano. Antonio's mother speaks of her deceased husband only in reference to the resulting fiscal constraints on the family during Antonio's absence. Carmela's conversation with her mother after Antonio gets fired from his job from the theater explains the common reality of traditional marriages based more on considerations of economic or social status than on personal connections:

CARMELA. Siete mai stata 'nnamurata vui?

MADRE. Io?

CARMELA. C'avisseve fatto si papà v'avesse lassata pe' ssempre?

MADRE. Figlia mia, è stato 'nu matrimonio talmente sbagliato,
c'avarria ringraziato Iddio [. . .]

Although we are given no specific information on the events leading up to Pasquale and Maria Rosa's wedding, the spectator can safely assume that the situation was similar to that of Giuliana and Luigi. Even if the ceremony was not orchestrated to "remedy" the error of premarital sex according to the cult of virginity, Carmela's discussion with her mother suggests that the choice of a husband was not up to her.

The importance of family approval and the frequency of arranged marriages in the South, often motivated by economic reasons (Parca 1966: 108), results in an alarming number of unions marked by a total absence of love. Family honor, financial advantage, and as the town priest says to Luigi's mother, a young woman to *work* in the home (essentially as a servant) are the purposes that marriage serve in this film.

Due soldi di speranza's indictment of the warped function of matrimony in Cusano and other small towns like it in the South is made plain through the juxtaposition of this conversation between Carmela and her mother with the clandestine marriage of Giuliana and Luigi at dawn that immediately follows it. In the film's original screenplay, the order of these two scenes is reversed, with the ceremony occurring just before the scene in the Artù residence, but they still appear one after another, thus making the screenwriters' intention of foreshadowing Giuliana's unpleasant future with Luigi Bellomo through Maria Rosa's comments evident (Castellani, De Filippo and D'Amico 2002: 175-79).

The marriage sequence that follows Carmela's conversation with her mother is no cause for celebration. The *mise-en-scène*, dominated by shadow from the opening shot of Antonio slowly pacing in the piazza to the church interiors during the ceremony, maintains a gloomy tone throughout. The gate in front assumes a more ominous function than usual; the oblique angle from which it is shot isolates the church from the open space of the rest of the piazza. Antonio's sarcastic response to the old sacristan's comment about ringing the bells in the tower

expresses the fact that the ceremony is the antithesis of what an ideal marriage should be:

SACRISTAN. Anto', questo Luigi Bellomo è proprio un animale, non ha voluto neanche che suonasse 'e campane.

ANTONIO. E volevate suonare pure le campane? Ma che 'sto matrimonio vi pare proprio 'na festa da chiamar gente che lo venga a vedere? A vedere 'o sole che splende, la carrozza fuori che aspetta gli invitati, i fiori, e 'a sposa vestita 'e bianco, e 'o sposo 'nnamurato?

Inside the church, the women are dressed in black as if they were attending a funeral. Luigi refuses to look at Giuliana while she struggles to place the ring on her husband's finger; Luigi's mother suggests to Giuliana that she try the little finger instead of the ring finger. Pietro Germi cites the poorly fitting ring, a symbol for the absence of love and the unsuitability of the union, in *Sedotta e abbandonata* in the marriage of Peppino and Agnese. The subversion of the function of holy matrimony, typically a joyous event, and the tone of the entire sequence are consistent with the incongruities common in the *commedia all'italiana* used for comic effect and the pairing of tragedy and comedy. Agnese's mother's demeanor in Germi's film echoes that of Antonio's mother in *Due soldi di speranza*; Giacomina is pleased by the outcome, and she makes the sign of the cross. When the bride, groom and the few attendees present exit the church the camera frames them through the bars of the gate. Giacomina continues to delude herself and comments on what she perceived to be a wonderful ceremony just before her daughter leaves home for a life of

unhappiness and servitude. With a mother-in-law who despises her and a new husband who does not love her, her future is as bleak as the dismal ceremony that inaugurates it.

In one of the film's most polemical sequences, Castellani attacks the absurdity of the republic's rules and regulations and also suggests the insensitivity and prejudice of the authorities when Antonio first heads to Naples to look for work after the failure of the bus co-op. While lost in the city center, he innocently asks a representative of the police force in plain clothes for directions. The undercover agent brings Antonio into the police station because he does not possess documentation for a job in the city. When the agent demands to see his papers, Antonio's response refers to a paradoxical policy instituted by the fascist regime: "Se sono disoccupato, come tengo libretti di lavoro?" Paul Ginsborg explains the function of an ordinance regarding internal migration that remained in effect until 1961 as follows:

A Fascist law of 1939, designed specifically to prevent internal migrations and urbanization, trapped the would-be migrant in a Catch-22 situation: in order to change residence to a town of more than 25,000 inhabitants, the migrant had to show evidence of employment at the new place of abode; however, in order to gain such employment the migrant had to first produce a new residence certificate. (1990: 218)

Once inside the station, Antonio is given a *foglio di via* and is forced to return to Cusano. The hostility of the metropolitan authorities toward outsiders and their air

of superiority toward Antonio and his ilk from the countryside are made clear when one of the officers insultingly refers to him as a *cafone*, or hick, in the presence of the commissioner without rebuke.

The cinematography of the scene inside the station reinforces the critique of the police force and their inflexibility when confronted with infractions of the legal code. When the police commissioner first appears, a wall vertically divides the frame, separating Antonio from the chief representative of the Neapolitan police force; the split composition suggests the lack of understanding between the authorities and the film's protagonist. None of the representatives of the *pubblica sicurezza* manifests any sympathy for Antonio's plight as a man who lost his father and has no means of supporting his family.

According to Stephen Gundle, with the arrival of the Allied forces toward the end of World War II, Italy witnessed the "presence of appealing American examples of progress and prosperity" like never before (2007: 107). In the postwar period, the message that America was "a model of modernity" was transmitted throughout the peninsula "in part through the rich corpus of seductive attractions that Hollywood offered (109); Italian theaters were inundated with over 800 American films between November 1946 and 1948, following the end of the Fascist ban on motion pictures imported from the United States (Quaglietti 1980: 245). Castellani connects the increasing pressure of modernity on the traditions of Cusano as well as Carmela and Antonio's desire for personal fulfillment and a new level of prosperity to the influence of Hollywood cinema through Antonio's job working for the widow Flora in her small network of theaters in Naples. During the metacinematic scene

that takes place in the projection booth, the young couple is enthralled by what we can assume is a love story as they look beyond the opening to the screen inside the theater below. Castellani associates the new ideals and attitudes of Italian youth and the push toward change suggested by *Due soldi di speranza*'s conclusion to the proliferation of images from Hollywood cinema depicting a lifestyle that radically differed from that of Italy during the reconstruction.

Castellani posits *Due soldi di speranza* as a hybrid form of neorealism by indicating the film's relationship to popular American films as well as the classics of the neorealist movement. We have seen how *Due soldi di speranza* adheres to many of the qualities attributed to neorealist practice and how the film is stylistically connected to Visconti's *La terra trema*. Castellani also nods to Rossellini's example by citing the memorable gag in *Roma città aperta* in which the priest, played by Aldo Fabrizi, moves two statues in order to save a saintly figurine from a vulgar view of a female nude. Castellani is conscious of Rossellini's deft blend of dramatic sequences and comic moments and reminds the spectator that the inaugural neorealist film is also a composite, not altogether removed from his own popular neorealist crossbreed. Despite the fact that *Ladri di biciclette* juxtaposes conventional cinematic practice with neorealism by way of Antonio Ricci's (Lamberto Maggiorani) job hanging posters for the Hollywood film *Gilda* (1946), De Sica's film, much like Rossellini's *Roma città aperta*, contains a number of comic intrusions, most of which are based on Bruno's antics.³² Whether or not De Sica and Zavattini intended for the *Gilda* poster to highlight the difference between the visual allure of

³² For example, the moment in which Bruno's father catches him in his attempt to urinate in the street, or when the priest strikes Bruno in the confession booth.

Hollywood and their neorealist aims, *Ladri di biciclette* undeniably utilizes comedy as well as cinematic artifice to enhance its impact on the audience.³³

The final sequence of *Due soldi di speranza* showcases the closed-mindedness of the antiquated value system prevalent in Cusano and the protagonists' denunciation of those beliefs and practices. After the scene in which Carmela's aunt speaks with Pasquale on behalf of Antonio and Carmela, the film cuts to a long shot of the young couple walking down a narrow alleyway while en route to the Artù family residence. The constricted space and uninviting, dark doors and windows visible on the right of the passage and as they walk into the piazza allude to the familial and cultural pressures that plague the protagonists throughout the course of the film. A dog emerges from the half-closed door to Carmela's home and greets her in the piazza; the domestic animal serves as a subtle reminder of Carmela's mistreatment at home and also foreshadows her family's attitude toward her when she confronts them with Antonio.

The cinematography during the encounter with her parents is carefully crafted to visually reflect Pasquale's air of superiority and the family's repudiation of their only daughter, Carmela. Her parents deny access to the safety of the family home and push her out into the inimical public territory of Cusano, where a crowd of townspeople has gathered to observe the spectacle. Pasquale and Maria Rosa are cognizant of the fact that their daughter will be subjected to shame and ridicule for the fictitious tryst that threatens the integrity of the family name. Two sets of doors accentuate the distance between the young couple and the Artùs; Carmela's mother

³³ E.g., the sequence that takes place under heavy rain was shot with the help of Roman firefighters and their hoses (Tomasulo 1982: 10).

turns toward the camera, facing the domestic space to which she is confined, away from her daughter who is standing beyond the entry at the edge of the piazza. Maria Rosa's pained expression communicates that she is conflicted, but fear of repercussions of physical violence for defying Pasquale and showing Carmela any sympathy ultimately determines her stance. Pasquale's discourse from the top of the stairs is shot from a high angle over his shoulder as he looks down at them to play up the ostentatious exercise of patriarchal authority and scorn for Antonio and his daughter. The patriarch's haughtiness and the carefully controlled cinematography in the sequence effectively denounce the behavior that the prevalent honor code encourages and suggests a break with the antiquated system on the part of a younger generation of Southern Italians.

The moment in which Antonio instructs Carmela to strip off her clothes in the middle of the piazza is one of the segments commonly used to support the argument that *Due soldi di speranza* is the "progenitor" of the string of lighthearted rural comedies that drown out realism with facile comic entertainment (Lizzani 1992: 136). The significance of Antonio's gesture is often misinterpreted as an appeal to male spectators and a harbinger of the emphasis on visual allure characteristic of the pink neorealist films featuring curvaceous *maggiorate fisiche*. For example, Enrico Giacobelli states that "i panni sporchi [. . .] vengono levati con abile fiuto commerciale quando il giovane protagonista strappa i vestiti alla fidanzata sulla piazza del paese" (2002: 74). Yet, Carmela is no *maggiorata fisica*, but rather a slender adolescent not fully developed; furthermore, the argument that Antonio's action is a crude commercial ploy is specious when one considers the fact that *Due*

soldi di speranza is characterized by the relative absence of the male gaze.³⁴ The camera devotes more attention to Antonio's body than to Carmela's; this is most clear during the scene in which Antonio works the Church's land under the heat of the sun in a tight, threadbare, sleeveless undershirt that accentuates his muscles. Moreover, when Carmela takes off her dress she still dons an undergarment, a conservative slip that covers much more of her body than the revealing rags Gina Lollobrigida wears throughout Comencini's *Pane, amore e fantasia*. Castellani's film is in fact one of few comedies from the early 1950s to resist the nascent tendency to showcase full-figured women for box-office receipts.³⁵ The implication of the removal of Carmela's dress is instead consistent with Maurizio Grande's observations on Antonio's decision to sever all ties with Pasquale Artù and forego any claim to a traditional dowry (2003: 137-38). The stripping of the few possessions she was given by her tyrannical father therefore functions as a symbolic break with an antiquated system, a family dominated by an unfeeling patriarch and centered on "things," on fiscal concerns and public opinion as opposed to meaningful human relationships (134).

Peter Bondanella and Pierre Leprohon observe that the removal of Carmela's clothing calls to mind the story of St. Francis' departure from home, but neither of them elaborates on the significance of this similarity (2004: 89; 1972: 123). The

³⁴ For the concept of the "male gaze," consult Laura Mulvey's seminal article entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," first published in *Screen* in 1975 and included in Braudy and Cohen (1999: 833-44).

³⁵ A number of Totò films from the late 1940s and early 1950s already featured shapely stars, such as Giovanna Ralli, as box-office draws. Gina Lollobrigida made her debut as a *maggiorata fisica* in "Il processo di Frine," an episode from Blasetti's *Altri tempi* (1952), in a costume that accentuates her bust in the same year that *Due soldi di speranza* was released.

parody of the story behind the saint suggests the decidedly unchristian stance of the Artùs in response to Carmela's brief flight from the city with the object of her affection. Antonio's comment to Pasquale also points out the hypocrisy of the common attitude toward extramarital relations by raising the issue of Christian principles of understanding and forgiveness: "Semo cristiane, che maniera è questa? Ci dovete almeno parlare." Public opinion takes precedence over fact, for the viewer is aware that Carmela is still chaste, but the rumors and assumptions based on their absence are enough to divide a family and destroy its reputation. Intolerance supersedes the piety and principles of forgiveness Catholicism espouses. In the village of Cusano, religion only reinforces the closed-minded views on virginity and family reputation that lead to the mistreatment or disavowal of young women, or, even worse, to honor killings and death.

Maurizio Grande interprets the conclusion of *Due soldi di speranza* as a "rituale festivo," a borrowing from Northrop Frye's theoretical deliberations on comedy in *Anatomy of Criticism*, that signals the birth of a new society, symbolically represented by the support of the townspeople in his "ribellione all'autorità paterna" (2003: 139). According to Grande, the conclusion ushers in the Italy of the economic boom, the rise of the middle classes in the nation's major cities and the persistence of the *arte d'arrangiarsi* (2003: 139-40). Yet, Castellani's film demonstrates how this movement toward prosperity and the future economic miracle is quite a ways off, especially for those living in rural parts of Southern Italy. The people of Cusano are unprepared for many of the changes taking place with the spread of modern influences in the postwar period. Antonio proclaims his right to a

decent life (“anche noi abbiamo il diritto di campà”), but the film clearly delineates a long list of impediments to his modest goal. The value system in Cusano, the spread of harmful rumors, the indifference of the authorities, the republic’s rules and regulations, and even the representatives of the Church impede Antonio and Carmela’s pursuit of happiness and prosperity.

According to Millicent Marcus, Castellani’s “insistence upon a happy ending [suggests] arbitrary, facile solutions for the very intransigent social problems his story [promises] to explore” (1986: 122). However, there is a considerable degree of uncertainty in the conclusion: Antonio still has no job, and therefore the spectator is aware of the fact that the young couple’s future will most likely be characterized by toil and hardship. Furthermore, in *Due soldi di speranza* we do not see Antonio and Carmela’s union, for the film ends with the young couple walking arm in arm in the direction of the church. The only wedding that we do in fact see is the doleful ceremony for Giuliana and Luigi Bellomo. That forced marriage functions as a counterpoint to Antonio and Carmela’s coupling, thus making it clear that their devil-may-care defiance of accepted norms is an anomaly and that few young Italians in a similar situation would be able to surmount the cultural and familial pressures the film attacks. Kenneth McLeish’s comment on happy endings in Aristophanes’ comedies suggests a way in which we might reconsider Marcus’ heavy-handed charge: “If the only way to achieve this happy ending is to invert the order of the world, then there is something seriously wrong with world order as it stands” (qtd. in Horton 1991: 2).

Due soldi di speranza's place in the history of Italian cinema has largely been determined by its connection to the pink neorealist films that followed, and not for its contribution to future Italian style comedies. The left accused Castellani of "privileging the private over the social" in his choice to make a love story central to the film's plot (D'Amico 1985: 74). Yet, this analysis has demonstrated that *Due soldi di speranza* is in fact one of the most forward-looking of comedies of the early 1950s, not only as a prognostication on the consumerism and societal change that will accompany the economic boom as suggested by Maurizio Grande, but also as a model for the *commedia all'italiana*, in particular the films that investigate the question of honor in the South. By juxtaposing the protagonist's dream of marriage with the local reality represented by Giuliana's fate as well as the Artù family's domestic situation, *Due soldi di speranza* plants the seed for other comedies that encouraged debate on issues such as divorce and the article providing reduced sentences for honor killings. The subject matter and the manner in which the central characters are portrayed, from Pasquale and his wife to Antonio's mother and sisters, provides the most important point of reference for Germi's *Sedotta e abbandonata* and *Divorzio all'italiana*. By dwelling on the return of the love story and insisting that pink neorealism presents an idyllic view of rural life, studies of Italian cinema tend to overlook those characteristics that represent a step in the direction of the Italian style comedy.

iii. *Pane, amore e fantasia* (1953) and *Poveri ma belli* (1957)

The consensus on *Due soldi di speranza* and on pink neorealism in general has been shaped primarily by a small number of motion pictures that do not adequately represent the comedies of the 1950s as a whole. Luigi Comencini's *Pane, amore e fantasia* and Dino Risi's *Poveri ma belli*, two of the most successful films of the decade, are the primary examples of *neorealismo rosa* included in histories of Italian cinema and are frequently criticized for their message of "happy resignation" and ideology that caters to the postwar "establishment" (Liehm 1984: 141). When compared to the Castellani film we analyzed, both titles manifest a greater degree of conservatism and an increased emphasis on the romantic intrigue to the detriment of social critique. In light of *Pane, amore e fantasia* and *Poveri ma belli*, we must consider a couple of important questions: what of Castellani's experimental blend between neorealism, satire, and traditional comedy remains in the commercial cinema of the middle of the 1950s and what role, if any, do these films play in the evolution of the *commedia all'italiana*?

The cinematography and location shooting in *Pane, amore e fantasia* draws for the most part from the masterworks of neorealism, but the film's plot and the opening titles communicate a message that differs from the works of directors such as Rossellini and De Sica, as well as the neorealist comedies that we have considered so far by Steno and Monicelli and Renato Castellani. The moving camera that follows a small bus up a winding dirt road and captures the mountainous landscape in the first sequence draws from the lesson of neorealism, but the titles superimposed on

the screen state that “La vicenda che stiamo per raccontarvi è immaginaria” and suggest to the audience that the story they are about to see unfold is something quite different.

The fictional town of Sagliena in *Pane, amore e fantasia* is a far cry from Cusano in *Due soldi di speranza*, for it lacks a precise geographic location and proximity to an Italian metropolitan center. Millicent Marcus explains how film censorship and pressure from producers constrained Luigi Comencini to abandon his initial plans to investigate the disparity between the North and South through a combination of comedy and social criticism (1986: 125-30), resulting in a completed project that is devoid of the satirical and symbolic critiques of the Italian authorities, church representatives, and social mores present in *Due soldi di speranza*. In the Comencini film, the fictional “town [ceases] to be the on-site location for a neorealist inquiry and [becomes] instead a theater for the performance of an ahistorical classical comedy” (1986: 140).

The fireworks in the sky for the festival of Sant’Antonio celebrate happy endings for two couples, both the young carabinieri Stelluti and the Bersagliera as well as the older Marshal Carotenuto and the midwife Annarella, and also signal the dominance of cinematic artifice in the final sequence. The joyous pairings support a conservative message to marry within one’s proper social class and age group, a vestige of the “white telephone” films and other traditional Italian comedies from the 1930s and early 1940s.³⁶ The pyrotechnics also recall Pasquale Artù’s profession

³⁶ See, e.g., Mary Wood’s comments on *Il signor Max* (1937) and *Campo de’ Fiori* (1943) in *Italian Cinema* (2005: 44-45) and Carlo Lizzani’s chapter on Mario Camerini in *Il cinema italiano: Dalle origini agli anni ottanta* (1992: 56-60).

in *Due soldi di speranza*, the symbolic indicator of that callous patriarch's propensity toward violence; the difference in function of the fireworks in these two films marks Comencini's distance from the satirical representation of the South in the Castellani film released the previous year. Here Comencini may be expressing his regret for being unable to pursue a similar vein of comic realism as he intended with a nod to his forebear.

While the majority of scenes in *Pane, amore e fantasia* mimic a neorealist aesthetic, the film espouses conservative ideology that fails to uphold the progressive aims of the neorealist movement or to challenge the strictures of Italian society in a manner consonant with the postwar comedies directed by Castellani and Steno and Monicelli that we have analyzed thus far. In this microcosm for provincial Italy separated from the nation's urban centers, the modern influences important to the faithful representation of the postwar era in Castellani's film, including fashion, consumer goods, more efficient travel between the city and countryside, etc., are completely absent. Love and marriage supersede all other topics in *Pane, amore e fantasia*:

Il mito della castità, il desiderio del matrimonio, come unica aspirazione e come realizzazione della felicità individuale sono i temi fondamentali del film (Brizio-Skov 2003: 149).

Poverty is widespread in Sagliena, but the film suggests that it is an inevitable part of everyday life for most of the townspeople, as natural as the earthquakes that regularly shake the surrounding territory (150). Unlike *Due soldi di speranza*, Comencini's film does not implicate the authorities, the local representatives of the

Church, and the national government in the difficulties the townspeople face in their daily lives or suggest that the current state of affairs can or will change.

Is Pane, amore e fantasia therefore simply a product aimed at placating national audiences and the conservative elements in Italian society overseeing the Italian film industry in those years? Does it contain any trace of the future *commedia all'italiana*? One possible answer lies in the Marshal Carotenuto character played by Vittorio De Sica. Jean A. Gili contends that the *Pane, amore* series is more critical than it may seem:

A guardar bene, questi 'pane-amore' sono più amari di quanto non sembri a prima vista: occorre tutto il talento di De Sica e la sua simpatia comunicativa per dare al maresciallo un sapore non del tutto negativo. (1980: 174-75)

Much of the comedy in the film stems from De Sica's antics, such as his flirtation with the Bersagliera despite a considerable age difference, his relentless pursuit of the midwife Annarella, and his interaction with the housemaid Caramella (Tina Pica). The excessive formality of the Marshal Carotenuto character, especially in terms of language, is also a source of comic entertainment and plays off of the concept of the *bella figura* and the propriety required by his position as a man in uniform. Although the Marshal is affable, De Sica's portrayal of the main character mocks his efforts to impress the townspeople through an exaggerated smile and blatantly artificial behavior.

The litany of names, titles, and provenances upon meeting the rest of the carabinieri stationed in Sagliena at the beginning of the film pokes fun at this sort of

excessive decorum. De Sica's wide grin and the mechanical repetition of "Maresciallo maggiore Carotenuto, piacere" demonstrates the actor's talent at satirizing the affectations of an Italian man who has successfully worked his way up the ranks of the military police. Despite the low level of education of the townspeople and even of some of his fellow carabinieri, Marshal Carotenuto frequently employs a high linguistic register that is incongruous with the context, creating ample opportunities for laughter. For example, he causes a great deal of confusion by substituting the term *discorrere* for the simpler verb *parlare* when giving orders to officer Stelluti, and another carabiniere named Sirio Baiocchi (played by Memmo Carotenuto) has trouble transcribing a letter for the marshal because of his elevated diction.

The origins of the Marshal Carotenuto character lie in De Sica's first on-screen appearances. Alberto Sordi recognized the unique qualities of De Sica as a comic actor in films directed by Mario Camerini in the 1930s, and his comments suggest that Vittorio was an important forerunner to the *commedia all'italiana* and perhaps a model for his own interpretation of the *italiano medio* years later:

era un attore veramente diverso da quelli che dominavano in quegli anni: ironico e autoironico, un vero anticipatore. Il pubblico non lo capiva perché era un bello [. . .]. (Giacovelli 2003: 108)

In an article concerning the acting career of Vittorio De Sica published in *Bianco e nero* in 1953, Giovanni Calendoli speaks of the nondescript features of De Sica that qualify him as a "uomo quotidiano" and describes his persona from the Camerini comedies of the 1930s through his role in Blasetti's *Tempi nostri* (1954) as

undeniably Italian (11-12). Calendoli mentions additional characteristics that correspond to current definitions of typical protagonists in Italian style comedies, including drawing inspiration from “authentic” current events and mannerisms of the Italian public, as well as the actor’s skill at abrupt shifts in tone: “sono evidenti nell’attore la mobilità, il brio, la versatilità: quella mobilità per la quale egli passa dalla battuta sentimentale all’espressione comica senza soluzione di continuità” (11).

According to Millicent Marcus, De Sica’s Marshal Carotenuto “is, in many ways, a middle-aged version of the young ladies’ man who graced so many of Mario Camerini’s 1930s sentimental comedies” (1986: 129). Marcus observes that his name is suggestive of his popular appeal: “he is still *carotenuto*—held dear” by Italian audiences decades after his on-screen debut (129). While Giovanni Calendoli views the De Sica persona as a decidedly positive one, an “italiano medio” who enjoys everything life has to offer (1953: 15-16), Alberto Farassino contends that his type in Camerini’s films is not exactly a “bravo ragazzo” as De Sica liked to claim, but rather “un simpatico mascalzone,” “un personaggio pronto a ogni disinvoltura, a ogni gioco della finzione” (1992: 109). It is this “eroe dell’ambiguità, dell’incertezza e del mascheramento” from the Camerini era (1992: 112), an endearing but also a calculating and deceitful protagonist, who lends himself so well to a satirical take on Italian rhetoric, inflated bureaucratic and literary language, the skillful manipulation of the *bella figura* for romantic endeavors and financial or political gain.

De Sica’s interpretation of the defense lawyer in “Il processo di Frine,” the famous segment from Blasetti’s episodic film *Altri tempi*, shows the actor’s persona

from the Camerini comedies moving in the direction of the future *commedia all'italiana*. This episode is well known for containing the first use of the term *maggiorata fisica*, the phrase that became associated with the immensely popular, curvaceous female stars of the 1950s.³⁷ Here De Sica leaves behind the young, generally positive characters in films such as *I grandi magazzini* (1939) and *Darò un milione* (1935) to assume a more dubious personality who exploits his venerable appearance and skill at rhetoric to convince, flatter or twist a given situation to his best advantage. Marshal Carotenuto in *Pane, amore e fantasia*, released the following year, is part of this new lineage. De Sica's roles in future Italian style comedies, such as the hypocritical mayor in Luigi Zampa's *Il vigile* (1960) and the well-respected but licentious president of the O.I.M.P in *Il moralista* (1959), directed by Giorgio Bianchi, derive from his characters in films of the 1950s.

The urban counterpart to the Comencini film is Dino Risi's *Poveri ma belli*. Like *Pane, amore e fantasia*, the majority of its comic content does not threaten the hegemony of the Christian Democrats or the teachings of the Catholic Church, but the preoccupations and quotidian activities of the young protagonists suggest incipient tension between the conservative status quo and a new generation of Italians growing up after the reconstruction. By replacing the fictional provincial town of Comencini's film with the city of Rome, Risi foregrounds the modernization

³⁷ The lawyer (Vittorio De Sica) in "Il processo di Frine" refers to Gina Lollobrigida's character as a "maggiorata fisica." Masolino D'Amico attributes the coinage to the screenwriter, Sandro Continenza (1985: 87).

of Italy in the mid-1950s and reflects growing prosperity in the Eternal City that hints at the impending economic boom. Cars and motorcycles on the streets downtown, Italian youth donning blue jeans and plaid shirts, sales of vinyl records, upscale restaurants, and a popular locale along the Tiber for swimming and sunbathing all point to rapid changes taking place in Italian society and make use of many of the common locations and objects that Enrico Giacovelli attributes to the future *commedia all'italiana* (1990: 99-129).³⁸

Poveri ma belli is an entertaining comedy that follows the antics of two Roman youths named Romolo (Maurizio Arena) and Salvatore (Renato Salvatori) as they compete for the attention of an attractive young woman, a curvaceous blonde named Giovanna played by Marisa Allasio, only to abandon the pursuit in the film's conclusion. Both Salvatore and Romolo are immature and shirk responsibility, much like Fellini's *vitelloni*, and their adolescent behavior ultimately impedes their efforts to successfully court the sophisticated Giovanna. In spite of this, the film ends happily, as Romolo accompanies Anna Maria, Salvatore's younger sister, on the walk back home, and Salvatore pairs with Marisa, Romolo's little sister, therefore establishing couplings safely within class boundaries.

Eroticism is central to *Poveri ma belli*, and the display of both the male and female body forms a large part of *Poveri ma belli*'s audience appeal. According to Enrica Capussotti, "I corpi maschili conquistano una visibilità nuova" in *Poveri ma belli* (2004: 114), although the muscular Antonio and his worn, sleeveless

³⁸ Giacovelli's study identifies high-rise apartment complexes, cars, television, beaches, parties and dances, soccer, popular music, and funerals as common elements and locations of the *commedia all'italiana*.

undershirt in *Due soldi di speranza* was a significant precursor to Romolo and Salvatore and their proclivity for tight blue jeans and short swim trunks. The Roman *fusti* are flanked by the voluptuous Giovanna, a *maggiorata fisica* Vittorio Spinazzola defines as a more refined, educated version of Gina Lollobrigida's Bersagliera (1974: 131). Despite the fact that Romolo and Salvatore are motivated by nothing other than sexual conquest, a strong sense of guilt regulates the decisions of the young women throughout *Poveri ma belli* and keeps would be seducers like our two main characters at bay.

Giorgio De Vincenti comments that "Tutto il film appare regolato dall'agire sotterraneo di un forte Super-io," a Super-ego based on a conservative Catholic and petite bourgeoisie moral code (1988: 55). The main characters are neatly contained in nuclear families with mothers, fathers, and siblings. The parents have precise roles as authority figures and they play an important part in the lives of their sons and daughters. *Poveri ma belli* therefore "ripropone il tipico ruolo di contenimento e di rassicurazione svolto dalla commedia del periodo" (Capussotti 2004: 121), in spite of the risqué attire and new forms of leisure popular with a younger generation at odds with traditional Catholic values.

The film presents an odd mixture of conservatism with a greater degree of vulgarity and more explicit references to sex than its precursors *Due soldi di speranza* and *Pane, amore e fantasia*. *Poveri ma belli* is a harbinger of the more frequent inclusion of foul language and the treatment of topics such as marriage, adultery, prostitution, etc., that will appear in the *commedia all'italiana* of the 1960s. For example, a young Roman derides Salvatore's efforts to hit on Giovanna with a

line containing a *parolaccia* that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier (“E lui che caga trucioli!”), and the film directly references premarital relations when Marisa, one of the protagonist’s younger sisters, assumes that Romolo and Salvatore go out at night to meet girls who are willing to have sex with them when Anna Maria asks her opinion on what their brothers do when they leave the house.

Whereas Castellani’s film satirizes such topics as the Italian authorities, church representatives, and the concept of honor in the South, the comedy in *Poveri ma belli* does not directly target or threaten the status quo, but rather tends to reinforce it: “Il riso della commedia qui—a differenza che in altri casi—non ci solleva dalla colpa, non mina neppure un po’ l’autorità, ma la riconferma [. . .]” (De Vincenti 1988: 56). The scene that briefly raises the question of uxoricide and the Codice Rocco only to abandon it for Romolo’s pursuit of Giovanna exemplifies how *Poveri ma belli* shies from some subjects that might offend the postwar Establishment. Giovanna’s father explains to one of his friends in passing that the Italian penal code grants a much lighter sentence to those who commit a murder in response to infidelity. The inclusion of their brief discussion calls to mind the importance of family honor to *Due soldi di speranza*’s plot, but the dialogue between the two older gentlemen is superseded by the romantic intrigue between Romolo and Giovanna in the entry to the palazzo as they hide themselves from sight behind a pillar. Ultimately, controversial issues like honor killings are brushed aside to make way for more lighthearted subjects in the *Poveri ma belli* series; while the two men disappear up a stairwell, the camera focuses on Romolo and Giovanna. The

Codice Rocco and the topic of family honor will not be scrutinized in an Italian comedy again until 1961, the year of Germi's *Divorzio all'italiana*, the period in which the Ufficio centrale di cinematografia's control over film content began to wane.

Although the Christian Democrat establishment is not directly targeted, tensions between conservative values and the diffusion of modern and foreign influences are apparent in *Poveri ma belli*, especially in the comportment of women. Giovanna demonstrates a new level of freedom and confidence in the generation of Italian women growing up after war. She enjoys flirting and going out with Salvatore and Romolo simultaneously, kissing in public places, and wearing alluring apparel that would have been unthinkable for the women of Cusano in *Due soldi di speranza* and the fictional town of Sagliena in *Pane, amore e fantasia*. Despite her relative independence, Marisa Allasio's character adheres to the expectations of the Catholic Church and assures her father that she is chaste. After she dispels confusion over which of the two boys she is currently seeing, she instructs her father not to worry: "Buonanotte papa. E stai tranquillo. Non faccio niente di male." In a telling sequence, Romolo unsuccessfully attempts to convince Giovanna to make love on a secluded beach. As soon as the camera cuts back to Rome, the first shot down the Lungotevere aims directly toward the dome of Saint Peter's, a reminder of the Catholic moral code and the reason for her refusal of Romolo's advances.

In her study of Italian youth and cinema, Enrica Capussotti identifies "virilità farsesca" as a new characteristic of the comic films of the 1950s (2004: 116). The laughable efforts of Salvatore and Romolo to woo Giovanna and other women in

Poveri ma belli through ostentatious displays of sculpted bodies, carefully chosen attire, and styling products likens the Risi film to other comedies from the same era that deflate the conception of Italian men as successful seducers or Latin lovers, from *Lo sceicco bianco* (1952) and *I vitelloni* to *Il seduttore* (1954) and *Un eroe dei nostri tempi* (1955). In addition to Maurizio Arena and Renato Salvatori, traditionally handsome or muscular Italian actors, such as Walter Chiari, Vittorio Gassman and Marcello Mastroianni, play the part of the Italian seducer figure throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Although lacking the physique and good looks of the others, Alberto Sordi also frequently assumes this role (2004: 117), and his shortcomings help make him particularly effective at mocking the notion of the Latin lover. The lampooning of these sorts of characters is common to the proto-Italian style comedy and will become a mainstay in the *commedia all'italiana* proper.

Poveri ma belli therefore presents an awkward blend of old and new, traditional Catholic values at odds with changing priorities of Italians in the 1950s. In Italian style comedy, the tension between these extremes creates a myriad of issues for Italians attempting to take advantage of the new opportunities made available by the economic miracle. In *Poveri ma belli* the urban setting, the emphasis on leisure activities, evidence of the increasing independence of a new generation growing up after the reconstruction and of women in particular, and a shift in focus toward the working world, or at least of the young grappling with new responsibilities, point in the direction of the full-fledged *commedia all'italiana*. Upon seeing a wealthy couple stroll past his table while dining with Giovanna in a restaurant in the center Rome, Romolo expresses his dream of visible wealth in

terms that one might expect to hear from a typical protagonist of an Italian style comedy: “Questa è la vita che mi piacerebbe fare: senza pensieri, e con un sacco di soldi.” Now we shall direct our attention to the early films of Alberto Sordi and Federico Fellini.

III. Early Fellini and Alberto Sordi

i. Fellini, Sordi and Italian Film Comedy

The widely popular Roman actor Alberto Sordi was crucial to the formation of the *commedia all'italiana*, and his portrayals of Italian men grappling with the challenges and new opportunities created by the economic boom are universally recognized as prime examples of Italian style comedy. According to Gian Piero Brunetta, Sordi was the first of the protagonists of the *commedia all'italiana* proper to truly capture the *italiano medio* and to target his “complete lack of direction and moral principles” (1980: 15). By the late 1950s Sordi had become a dominant figure in Italian cinema, and the unprecedented degree of negativity he contributed to his characters helped shape the dark, cynical aspects of the movement later dubbed Italian style comedy. In the words of Mario Monicelli, Sordi

Ha avuto la genialità di inventare un personaggio diverso da tutti gli altri comici nella storia del cinema, vigliacco, cattivo, traditore, prevaricatore, che fa ridere [nonostante sia] una persona abietta, mentre in genere il comico è buono. (Toffetti 2001: 35)

Whereas traditional comic protagonists tend to be likeable victims that spectators “root for,” Sordi’s characters in films from the 1950s onward include a host of reprehensible attributes (d’Amico 1985: 67).

Initially Italian audiences were reluctant to accept the unconventional, negative qualities of his protagonists, and for this reason Roberto Savarese’s

Mamma mia che impressione! (1951), the first film to feature Sordi in a lead role, was a commercial failure.³⁹ Federico Fellini described Sordi's early lack of success as follows:

Purtroppo la comicità di Sordi in quegli anni era capita pochissimo . . . forse perché non aveva una dimensione né ironica né sentimentale, ma era grottesca con un fondo di sgradevolezza che non piaceva. (qtd. in Livi 1967: 82)

Sordi did not establish widespread fame as a comic actor until the middle of the decade, when the success of Fellini's *I vitelloni* (1953) and Steno's *Un americano a Roma* (1954) confirmed that he was capable of appealing to national audiences. The director from Rimini recognized Sordi's talent at representing the worst aspects of *italianità*, and his insistence on casting Sordi in *I vitelloni*, despite the lack of success of *Lo sceicco bianco* (1952), was essential to launching his film career.

Sordi, however, was not alone in playing rather unlikable figures that differed from the comic heroes of conventional Italian comedies. Fellini placed Sordi among a multitude of contemptible characters in both *Lo sceicco bianco* and *I vitelloni* that serve to pinpoint and criticize certain national phenomena in a manner consistent with the *commedia all'italiana*, although the Roman actor's propensity for the grotesque set him apart from his contemporaries.

Not without a hint of self-importance, since he makes no mention of Antonio De Curtis, Alberto Sordi explains the idea behind his foray into cinema in a way that

³⁹ Enrico Giacovelli sums up the reason for the film's lack of success as follows: "Al pubblico non piacque, perché era difficile identificarsi in questo petulante giovane cattolico da 'Comunione e Liberazione'" (2002: 84).

is strikingly similar to the motivation behind Steno and Monicelli's projects with Totò:

Quando cominciai a lavorare [. . .] esisteva il film assolutamente serio o del tutto comico, quello di Tognazzi e Vianello, di Macario . . . Io volevo fare il cinema neorealistico con una notazione comica, non il film comico. (1985: 191)

This study has demonstrated that a number of films starring Antonio De Curtis as well as Renato Castellani's *Due soldi di speranza* had a decisive impact on the future course of Italian comedy by experimenting with a blend of tragedy, comedy, and social criticism a number of years before Sordi became popular in the mid 1950s. "Neorealism with a comic touch" was not Sordi's invention alone, and his trajectory was not dissimilar to that of Antonio De Curtis; both began their careers as comic actors with small roles on stage in variety theater routines and both based their characters and content on observations of everyday people. The Roman actor was therefore not the only one pushing against the conventions of traditional farces and slapstick comedy, although one characteristic that set Sordi apart was his physical appearance:

Uno normale con la faccia normale come avevo io, non faceva ridere nessuno [. . .] Capii quindi che non dovevo andare alla ricerca dell'originalità come gli altri comici, che non dovevo rappresentare l'eccezione buffa proprio perché è eccezione, ma dovevo invece ricercare la popolarità, la normalità. (qtd. in Giacobelli 2003: 107)

Due in part to the fact that he lacked the peculiar physical features of many of the comic figures of the past (e.g., the pronounced chin and asymmetrical visage of Totò, the corpulence of Aldo Fabrizi), he was particularly well-suited to play the part of the *italiano medio*.

Federico Fellini also had a hand in postwar film comedy, and not only for his prescient recognition of Sordi's talent. As a screenwriter he contributed to some of the most important precursors to the *commedia all'italiana*, including Roberto Rossellini's seminal *Roma città aperta*. The association between neorealism and the origins of the *commedia all'italiana* owes much to Federico Fellini, for the "comic interpretation of Don Pietro" and the *padellata* that Mario Monicelli sees as the movement's inaugural gesture has been directly attributed to Fellini's hand in the film's screenplay (Bondanella 1993: 53). Fellini's writing for humoristic publications such as *420* and the *Marc'Aurelio* served as a testing ground for his work in Italian cinema, and his collaborations with Aldo Fabrizi and Erminio Macario, both on material for their variety theater routines and on many of their films in the late 1930s and early 1940s, attest to his importance to the works of the comic actors who made significant steps towards realism and commentary on contemporary Italian society just before and immediately following World War II.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ For a consideration of Fabrizi and Macario and their place in the history of Italian film comedy, see Gili (1980: 159-69).

ii. *Lo sceicco bianco* (1952): The High Cost of Conformity and the Birth of the Sordi
Type

Lo sceicco bianco, the first film directed solely by Federico Fellini, is an innovative comedy that not only introduces the peculiar poetics of a nascent auteur but also features a number of the thematic and stylistic elements associated with the comic cinema of the economic boom. Ivan, a petit bourgeoisie provincial who places family name, social status, and propriety above all else, is a grotesque representation of the concerns of conservative Italians during the reconstruction. The attention paid to popular trends and common forms of leisure, a trademark of the *commedia all'italiana*, is discernible in *Lo sceicco bianco*'s critique of the *fotoromanzi*, one of the most widely read publications in postwar Italy.⁴¹ Fellini's caustic satire spares few of the characters portrayed on screen: he not only targets the vulgar crew that produces the fanciful illustrated magazines, but also a widespread provincial outlook that limits the potential for personal development and meaningful relationships. *Lo sceicco bianco* criticizes the rampant conservatism of the period following WWII and ridicules various facets of Italian society, from Ivan's idolatry of the State and his adherence to old-fashioned ideals espoused by the Catholic Church, to the prevalence of would-be seducers like the pathetic Fernando Rivoli, an early version of Sordi's *vitellone* type.

⁴¹ The *fotoromanzi* were illustrated magazines consisting of still photographs and written dialogue akin to comic books. Tullio Kezich notes that they were particularly popular in the peripheral areas of Italian cities and in the countryside (2002: 119), and David Forgacs and Steven Gundle explain that "the readers [. . .] were mainly women from the middle to lower social classes" (2007: 42).

Following a respectable premiere at the Venice Film Festival in September 1952, *Lo sceicco bianco* did not perform well at the box office and was not popular with Italian critics (Kezich 2002: 127), due in part to the lack of big-name actors and to a unique form of comedy that did not yet resonate with national audiences. Giulio Cesare Castello published one of the more favorable reviews of the film in *Cinema* in December, citing Fellini's proclivity for comedy of manners and acrid commentary on Italian society derived from his experience as a cartoonist for humoristic publications (qtd. in Fava and Viganò 1987: 58-59). Despite Fellini's propensity for dreams and fantasy on the whole and the intrusion of certain subjective shots and sequences, the critic notes that the "tone of realistic farce" is dominant in *Lo sceicco bianco* (59). Whereas poverty and postwar squalor are still central to contemporaneous comedies such as Steno and Monicelli's *Guardie e ladri* and Renato Castellani's *Due soldi di speranza*, the social milieu and day to day concerns of the protagonists in *Lo sceicco bianco* shift in the direction of the *commedia all'italiana*; Wanda and Ivan herald the return of the middle classes and a degree of well-being largely absent from comic cinema produced in Italy before 1951-52.

According to Pierre Leprohon, in Fellini's cinematic "universe" the director tends to reveal that he "loves the characters he creates" (1972: 143). Leprohon argues that *Lo sceicco bianco* is an exception to the rule, for in it nearly "all the characters seem to be deliberately conceived as hateful and despicable," including the two main protagonists (143). Lino Del Fra offers an explanation for the pronounced cruelty of Fellini's debut film in the context of the director's early cinema: *Lo sceicco bianco* is

il più oggettivo, il più svincolato da una poetica della memoria; l'opera in cui il regista non si identifica e non si confonde con nessuno dei protagonisti. (qtd. in Fava and Viganò 1987: 61)

Fellini's sympathy for opprobrious characters such as Zampanò in *La strada* (1954) and Augusto in *Il bidone* (1955) and his belief in the possibility of personal growth and change for the better is absent from his solo directorial debut. Fellini's spiteful, unforgiving stance toward the protagonists in *Lo sceicco bianco* allows for a caustic critique of the postwar era by targeting their provincial mindset, the oppressive weight of the Church on their daily lives, the falsity of the fantasy world shaped by the *fotoromanzi*, and their lack of self-awareness.

In *Lo sceicco bianco*, Ivan Cavallo and his wife Wanda head to Rome to celebrate their honeymoon. Ivan plans a rigid schedule of activities during their stay in the capital with various members of his family, including a night at the opera and an audience with the pope arranged by his uncle, a man with ties to the Vatican. Wanda, an avid reader of *fotoromanzi*, goes to Via XXIV Maggio to visit the editorial office of her favorite publication in the hope of meeting her idol Fernando Rivoli, the "White Shiek." Enchanted by the people she meets at the publisher's headquarters and by the troupe, she follows them to the beach where she meets Rivoli and takes part in shooting an episode of the *fotoromanzo*. Rivoli makes a bungled attempt to seduce Wanda after stealing a boat being used for filming, and when they return to shore Fernando is berated by his wife and Wanda is confronted with reality. Meanwhile, Ivan attempts to cover up his wife's absence by convincing his family that she is not feeling well. When Wanda returns to Rome she attempts suicide, but

is caught in the act and is subsequently taken to an insane asylum. The next morning, Ivan frantically picks his wife up in a taxi and heads to Saint Peter's square to meet his family just in time for an audience with the pope.

The city of Rome is integral to Fellini's satirical comedy and its function is comparable to the role of the capital in the films of the *commedia all'italiana*. Mira Liehm argues that "the city itself [. . .] is the protagonist of *The White Sheik*" (1984: 117); point of view shots from the moving train before the arrival at the station establish the film's setting at the outset and the first word that Ivan utters, the first spoken dialogue of the film, is the name of the city. Ivan's elated "Roma" discloses the importance of the image of the capital to him and to other Italians like him living in the provinces. Ivan and Wanda are residents of Altovilla Marittima, an imaginary provincial town, and their generic provenance permits the satirical take on their beliefs and comportment to extend to provincial Italy as a whole in the early 1950s. As the seat of Italian government and the home of the Roman Catholic Church, Rome is a synecdoche for national ideals and values and is also their place of origin. For this reason, the capital is the most common setting for the films of the *commedia all'italiana*, a movement that constantly engages with and assumes a critical position toward contemporary Italian society (Giacovelli 2002: 92). For the provincial Ivan, Rome is a city of power and influence; he boasts of his uncle's connections to the Vatican and reveals to his wife in the hotel that he expects to become "segretaria comunale" of Altovilla Marittima with his help. In the comedies of the economic boom, Rome performs a similar function and is depicted as an important banking and political center, the source of cash for investments, speculation, and housing

development. In summary, it is the primary city in which the protagonists hope to attain wealth and success.

The camerawork in the first sequence that takes place at the hotel complements the dialogue to clearly delineate the characteristics of the two protagonists and establish their flawed relationship to one another. Their conversation inside the hotel room is filmed almost entirely in shot/reverse shot to indicate disconnection and lack of communication. The moment when Ivan first enters the room is the only point in which the two are placed together in a single frame, yet even in this composition they are distinctly separated by the foreground and background. Ivan berates Wanda for taking the elevator alone with the bellhop while she looks longingly over the edge of a window frame resembling a gate out toward Via XXIV Maggio as she dreams of the White Shiek. The space inside the hotel is tight and the camera is immobile; changes in point of view are achieved through editing rather than dollies or pans, as if to correspond to Ivan's rigid schedule, his conformism and a lifestyle dictated by predictable codes of conduct appropriate to his social class and conservatism.

Additional elements of *mise-en-scène* function as indicators of Ivan and Wanda's primary traits. Ivan's excessive concern over each of their suitcases, apparent from the moment they arrive at the station, corresponds to his carefully controlled and compartmentalized daily life. His preoccupation with the luggage is also communicated in dialogue when he counts them out loud upon returning to the room. When Wanda rifles through her trunk in search of the note from the White Sheik, the bags are prominently shown in the foreground as she carelessly knocks

open the suitcase and dumps a number of items onto the floor. Her absentmindedness runs counter to her husband's methodical planning, and Ivan's order is juxtaposed with Wanda's disarray through the manner in which the belongings are arranged on screen. As is often the case in the cinema of Federico Fellini, costume choice also contributes to the understanding of the psychology of the protagonists.⁴² Wanda dons a large coat and an ornate hat with a thin veil over her face to suggest that her world is filtered through dreams shaped by the *fotoromanzi* she avidly reads. Ivan's meticulous, conservative dress consists of a black suit and bowler that matches his predictable, controlled behavior. Ivan in fact "loses his hat (symbol for his 'dignity')" at various points in the film (Murray 1976: 44), and the loss or absence of the hat reflects his vulnerability, the loss of the veneer of propriety he strives to maintain.

The soundtrack to the hotel scene accentuates the comic effect of Ivan's discussion of the rigid schedule he has created for their honeymoon and hints that his behavior is connected to postwar Italy on the whole. Ivan reveals that the trip has been carefully planned: "Tutto è organizzato minuziosissimamente senza concederci una pausa." The trip entails visits to famous tourist attractions associated with Roman history, including the Pantheon, the Roman Forum, the Colosseum, and Palatine Hill. The audience with the pope and the role of the Church in the film is significant to *Lo sceicco bianco* and its conclusion, but the hotel sequence ridicules Ivan's patriotism most of all. The last visit he mentions is to the

⁴² "Vado in cerca di facce che dicano tutto di sé al primo apparire sullo schermo; tendo anzi a sottolinearne i caratteri, a evidenziarli col trucco, col costume, proprio come avviene con le maschere dove è già tutto chiaro, comportamento, destino, psicologia" (Fellini 2004: 80).

“Altare della Patria,” or the National Monument to Victor Emanuel II, and when he speaks of it he stands to pay homage: “. . . e, verso sera, tutto illuminato, l’altare della patria.” The soundtrack mocks Ivan’s overzealous adulation of the nation by pairing his statement with the exegetic sound of a trumpet. Ivan makes it clear that his allegiances lie with the Church and State above all and therefore supersede his relationship with his wife. When he finally speaks of an intimate dinner with Wanda after a slew of other obligatory activities, the soundtrack abruptly shifts to a sentimental tune to poke fun at Ivan’s pitiful attempt to set aside time alone with his wife. As he looks on Wanda, he turns to check himself in the mirror adjacent to her; the shot implies that image, outward appearances, will always take precedence over his wife and their relationship to one another.

The “spirito laico” that Mario Monicelli ascribes to the *commedia all’italiana* and that we have identified in his films with Totò and in Castellani’s *Due soldi di speranza* is also shared by Fellini’s *Lo sceicco bianco*. The fact that Vatican City is discernible in the opening of the film in the shots from the moving train and that the conclusion takes place in Saint Peter’s square suggests that the Catholic Church is significant to Fellini’s satire; the sound of church bells and the presence of other images associated with Catholicism in *Lo sceicco bianco* point to the prominent role of the national religion in the postwar period and hint at the relationship between Italians like Ivan and Wanda and the Church in the early 1950s. When Wanda sneaks out of the hotel and makes her way towards Via XXIV Maggio in search of the White Sheik, church bells are audible on the film’s soundtrack. In the fifties the Vatican strongly encouraged traditional gender roles that limited women to the

domestic sphere. Wanda's flight can be read as a response to Ivan's treatment of her and to the highly conservative atmosphere of those years. Repressed, timid, and overshadowed by a husband who barks orders and fails to attend to her needs, Wanda's retreat to the world of the *fotoromanzi* is her reaction to an unsatisfying quotidian existence. Fellini intimates that Wanda and Ivan are products of the efforts of the Christian Democrats and the Church to influence the lives of Italian citizens via the value system they espoused in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The bells on the soundtrack also serve a metacinematic function by commenting on the products that were distributed in Italian theaters in the early 1950s. As Wanda heads toward Via XXIV Maggio she passes a string of movie posters advertising commercial films, from Hollywood cinema to an Italian comedy starring Renato Rascel. The absence of neorealist titles from the series of ads comments on the effects of censorship on the movies screened in theaters during the years in which the DC and the Church prioritized the suppression of films that openly criticized the conservative establishment or Italian institutions. Wanda's walk past the advertisements for popular cinema on the way to the editorial office also implies the relationship between cinema and *fotoromanzi*; both are presented as forms of escape from the strictures of daily life in postwar Italy, including those imposed on Wanda and Ivan by the Church.

The interior of the editorial office manifests Wanda's subjective state, while at the same time the viewer is made aware of the contrast between a vulgar reality and Wanda's take on the environment and the people she encounters. The office is littered with photos of the sheik; a picture of Fernando Rivoli in a comically puffed-

up pose with his hands on his hips donning his costume is framed on the corner of the editor's desk, and the wall behind it is also packed with images of Rivoli. The overabundance of photographs of the sheik is implausible, since Marilena, the woman in charge, reveals that the publisher produces a number of other *fotoromanzi* featuring a myriad of heroes and villains, and therefore is suggestive of Wanda's obsession with the sheik. Although neorealism tends to be associated with objectivity, the profusion of photographs in Fellini's mise-en-scène in the office recalls subjective elements in De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, in particular the preponderance of bikes the protagonist Antonio Ricci sees just before he decides to attempt to steal one. Just as Ricci fixates on the necessity of a bike to keep his job and the mise-en-scène manifests his mental state before the theft, Wanda is absorbed by the experience in the editorial office and the photographs foreshadow the encounter with the object of her affection.

Wanda foolishly fails to notice any of the cues that undermine her idealized vision of the people associated with the production of the illustrated magazines she eagerly reads. During the course of her visit to the editorial office, one of Rivoli's colleagues pokes fun at her idol by telling Wanda that he only comes by the office when he picks up his check (hardly the sign of a dedicated professional), a young man in a Bedouin costume scolds a dog that growls at him in a popular Roman accent with harsh language, and Oscar, another actor, gives raspberries to the children following the truck as the troupe leaves for the beach. In one of many ironic moments in the film, Marilena's assistant, Gigione, hits on his boss and he and

another young employee size up Wanda just after she complains about the comportment of men in the provinces:

Io sogno sempre. Non c'è altro da fare laggiù. Cosa vuole, gente volgare. I giovanotti non sanno neanche parlare, sa? Quando qualcuno ha fatto la passeggiata per il corso e . . .

Fellini satirizes the comportment of Italian men across the peninsula and pokes fun at Wanda's naïve belief that the issue is isolated to her provincial town. While Wanda is in the office Gigione runs his hand through his hair, straightens his tie, smiles at Wanda sleazily, and later flaps his tie while leaning over his boss in an obvious sexual innuendo. *Lo sceicco bianco* is filled with instances of men attempting to coax women into bed, from Rivoli to the seedy, corpulent man who interrupts the shooting on the beach and watches the women in costume voyeuristically. None of these men succeed in the undertaking, however; Italian men in Fellini's *Lo sceicco bianco* prefigure a long list of ineffectual seducer types featured in the comedies of the 1950s and in the *commedia all'italiana*.

Jacqueline Reich explains that "on an extra-national level, Italian masculinity has been seen as the sexual masculine ideal of Western civilization," but "underneath the façade of a presumed hyper-masculinity" lies the "*inetto*" often portrayed on screen in the *commedia all'italiana* (2004: xii). Fernando Rivoli is the most memorable of these blundering womanizers in *Lo sceicco bianco*, and his shortcomings establish the fundamental characteristics of a host of Sordi's protagonists in subsequent films from the 1950s. Rivoli is deceitful, egotistical, unprofessional, and all too eager to sacrifice a day's work by sailing off in a boat he

steals from the crew for a chance to be alone with his naïve admirer, Wanda. The extraordinary efforts of this Roman buffoon of popular origins to impress his devotee by feigning to be suave and cultured are highly comical.

Fernando's first appearance, a subjective low-angle shot in an "abnormal" swing high among the trees from Wanda's point of view, is an iconic segment of *Lo sceicco bianco* (Giacovelli 2003: 93). The scene, while depicting her fascination with the White Sheik, quickly turns satirical as Fernando's song is interrupted by one of the members of the troupe calling out "A Nandooo!" from the beach nearby, thus contrasting Wanda's fantasy with a vulgar Roman reality (Livi 1967: 79). Wanda comically fails to pick up on any of the signs of Fernando's true character despite a number of moments in which his lack of intelligence becomes glaringly apparent. For example, he confuses the terms "anteriore" and "posteriore" while attempting to make a poetic statement about a past life, and his dialogue is often stilted as he attempts to abandon popular Roman locutions for terms he deems more appropriate to the façade. The editing stresses Rivoli's incompetence when he is struck on the head by the boom of the vessel while attempting to steal a kiss from Wanda. The action abruptly cuts from the boat to Ivan at the opera attending a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*; the juxtaposition ridicules Fernando's ineffectual effort to seduce Wanda on the boat.

The White Sheik is fully unmasked upon return to the shore. The cocky Don Juan figure is a fawning child in the presence of his wife, Rita, a woman far bigger than he who is waiting with the rest of the crew when he returns to the beach, and a

sycophant to his irate boss. Fernando Rivoli's comportment is consistent with Maurizio Porro's description of the Alberto Sordi type in the *commedia all'italiana*:

È l'italiano che frega il prossimo, che è pronto a essere servile coi potenti e arrogante con chi gli è inferiore di grado, l'italiano mammone e fallocratico. (qtd. in Giacovelli 2003: 117)

Fernando cowardly blames the ordeal on Wanda and attempts to apologize to his superior, while at the same time barking at a lesser member of the troupe for his unwelcome criticism. When Fernando leaves the beach, he climbs onto the back of the motorcycle while his brawny wife drives. The vacillation between arrogance and servility, the inept attempts at seduction, and the often childlike comportment and weakness when confronted with a wife or mother figure, are consistent with Sordi's protagonists in a host of future Italian style comedies, from *I vitelloni* to *Il seduttore*, *Il vedovo* (1959) and *Il vigile* (1960).

Wanda's excursion with Fernando and the troupe is juxtaposed with Ivan's fruitless search that begins at Via XXIV Maggio and then leads him to a police station in central Rome. His loss of composure is communicated in close-up upon reading a letter written to Wanda by the White Sheik he finds on the street. Perturbed, sweaty, and with no hat on his head, Ivan's petit bourgeois respectability is threatened without his wife by his side. A group of shock troops that run past in formation and nearly trample Ivan metaphorically represent the fact that Ivan's plans for the perfect honeymoon have been dashed by Wanda's absence. Later, when Ivan flees from the police station, he comically tries to fall in line with the military police by taking part in an organized display so as not to be noticed. His ridiculous attempt to

blend in with the officers during the exercise is tantamount to his extraordinary effort to become a consummate petite bourgeois conservative by starting a family and securing a position as a bureaucrat in his local town council. Ivan runs himself ragged while striving to live up to the ideals he holds dear, but ironically it is Ivan, not Wanda, who ultimately transgresses these codes by returning home with a motherly prostitute he meets in a piazza in Rome late at night.

The environment in the nocturnal piazza sequence serves to highlight Ivan's hypocritical behavior. The scene begins with a low-angle shot of church bell towers accompanied by chiming on the soundtrack, and then the camera uncovers a despondent, intoxicated Ivan who stumbles to the edge of a fountain to sit down. The sequence ends with Ivan walking back to the hotel accompanied by the larger of the two prostitutes after explaining his sad story to the only two people with whom he feels safe divulging the information. The spectator is led to assume that she offers Ivan more than just moral support upon returning to the hotel. The juxtaposition of Ivan's departure and the presence of the Church implied by the towers makes his failure to live up to the conservative, Catholic ideals apparent, as does the contrast between Ivan's encounter with the prostitutes and the conclusion to Wanda's day at the beach. While Ivan spends the end of the night with a prostitute, Wanda rejects a man's advances after getting a ride back to Rome by car in one of many instances of clever cross-cutting in *Lo sceicco bianco*.

Fellini spares neither Romans nor provincial Italians in his satirical take on Italy in the early 1950s. Although we might commiserate with the protagonists, neither one of them is idealized, and their moments of despair or distress are

exaggerated and rendered absurd rather than dramatized or charged with pathos. Ivan is hopelessly provincial and Wanda is a foolish, credulous dreamer who fails to observe any of the obvious signs that her sheik is an uncouth and unprofessional hack. Other minor characters in the film, most of which are Romans, are all reproachable in one way or another, from the rotund man working the desk at the hotel who incessantly pushes postcards on the guests, to the cantankerous taxi driver who has little patience for Ivan and his troubles. The two prostitutes that Ivan meets by chance late at night while sobbing, seated on the edge of a fountain in a deserted piazza are the only characters that are pardoned in Fellini's bitter satire. These two outcasts, scorned by the Church and mainstream society for their immoral profession, are the most compassionate and sincere individuals we encounter in the course of the film. In the words of Pierre Leprohon,

In the midst of this story of puppets, these silhouettes in the night suddenly point the way to truth and life. They alone are alive, because they are free, unattached, human. (1972: 144-45)

Fellini contrasts Cabiria, the smaller and livelier of the two women, and her sympathetic colleague with the rest of the characters in *Lo sceicco bianco*. Whereas Ivan and Wanda never show true affection for one another at any point in the film, the heavysset prostitute embraces Ivan, blows him kisses and consoles him. In many Fellini films at least one of the protagonists manages to grow, progress, or learn from their experiences during the course of the story, yet Wanda and Ivan ultimately remain as isolated and clueless as they are in the beginning and never achieve any sort of greater understanding.

Remi Fournier Lanzoni argues that dialect, especially popular Roman locutions, becomes increasingly important in Italian comedies toward the end of the 1950s and is characteristic of the films of the *commedia all'italiana* proper (2008: 31-34). It would be erroneous to suggest, as Fournier Lanzoni does, that Roman dialect is peculiar to the *commedia all'italiana* of the late 1950s and 1960s; Fellini takes his cue from regional comedy as well as neorealist films, both of which privileged authenticity of language and made use of various regional dialects. Colorful Roman discourse provides opportunities for laughter or enhances many of the comic moments in *Lo sceicco bianco*. From the taxi driver's exclamation ("Aoh, a matto!"), to the man who bore witness to Wanda's suicide attempt at the edge of the Tiber ("Mannaggia la miseria! Stavo a dormì . . ."), to the members of the troupe who address Rivoli only by the abbreviated "Nando," lively *romanesco* is at the heart of film and constitutes a significant part of its appeal. The comic theatrical tradition contains a great deal of Neapolitan, and films starring Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi before and after the war made their Roman provenance important parts of their comic identities. *Lo sceicco bianco* is part of a greater trend in postwar cinema, and the dialect in many of the "neorealist comedies" or proto-*commedia all'italiana* analyzed in this study, including *Guardie e ladri* and *Poveri ma belli*, contain a great deal of popular Roman pronunciation and diction.

Fellini, much like Mario Monicelli in *Totò e i re di Roma* and *Totò e Carolina*, criticizes national institutions, from the indifference of the authorities to a sluggish, antiquated Italian bureaucracy. Fellini's stance is made clear in the scene that takes place in police headquarters when Ivan seeks help in finding Wanda. After Ivan calls

the hotel from the opera house and hears that she has yet to return, the transition to the next scene is achieved through a dissolve. The camera zooms in on the hood of a jeep labeled “polizia” parked just outside the station to establish the location of the sequence. This brief introduction to police headquarters offers an unflattering representation of the authorities by showing an idle officer sitting in the front seat of the vehicle reading a newspaper while another agent performs maintenance underneath it. Inside the station the inspector shows little concern for Ivan and his predicament; he deems him insane, locks him in the office, and goes in search of a psychiatrist. The presence of three agents total, including the inspector, a young officer transcribing the exchange on a typewriter, and a superfluous third member of the force who does nothing other than stand by and listen, intimates that the police are ineffectual and poorly managed. A number of Italian style comedies draw from the example of this sequence from *Lo sceicco bianco* and the aforementioned Monicelli films, including the brief episode entitled “Il mostro” from Dino Risi’s *I mostri*.⁴³

The scene that takes place at the mental hospital raises the issue of family honor and hints that Ivan and Wanda’s issues stem from their efforts to ascribe to a conformist petite bourgeois lifestyle. When Ivan finally finds his wife inside a sparse room at the asylum, the wall next to the doorframe separates the newlyweds and reiterates the lack of communication established at the beginning of the film before Wanda’s departure from the hotel. A cross on the wall in the room connects the

⁴³ In the Risi film, two mentally deficient officers, played by Vittorio Gassman and Ugo Tognazzi, smile grotesquely for the camera after apprehending a famous serial killer.

institution of the Church to the importance of the family in postwar Italy. When Ivan states that the family must come before all else, the camera frames him in a medium close-up with the cross conspicuously placed adjacent to his head: “Non voglio sapere niente adesso. Prima l’onore della famiglia . . .” According to the traditional code of honor, sacrifices must be made for the family name. Although Ivan and Wanda’s provincial hometown is not ascribed to any particular region in the course of the film, Ivan’s priorities suggest that he and his family come from the South, the region in which the primacy of familial honor was deeply ingrained in local culture. Fellini’s *Lo sceicco bianco*, like Castellani’s *Due soldi di speranza*, prefigures Germi’s *Divorzio all’italiana* and *Sedotta e abbandonata* by satirizing the tremendous efforts of the protagonists to protect the family reputation.

In the conclusion of *Lo sceicco bianco*, the newlyweds are reunited just in time to meet Ivan’s relatives for an audience with the pope in what is best defined as a specious happy ending. The location of Saint Peter’s square as a backdrop for the unlikely couple’s first meeting with the Cavalli family suggests that they married to fulfill the expectations of the conservative Catholic environment, to keep up appearances, not because they share any deep connection. One of Wanda’s most significant lines in the film draws attention to *Lo sceicco bianco*’s central themes: “Ci sono cose più grandi e più forti di noi.” Her comment alludes to the strong pressures of daily life in postwar Italy, such as the weight of the Church and the primacy of the family, that determine the decisions and comportment of the film’s protagonists. Ivan and his family fall in line with the others present to meet the pope, an organized group that recalls the training exercise of the police officers and the

regimented march of the *bersaglieri*. The camera pans to the right across the entrance to Saint Peter's and ends on a statue of an angel in the center of the piazza. According to Frank Burke, "the final shot becomes the icon of a world ruled over by blind institutional authority" (1996: 36).

Mira Liehm reads the conclusion of *Lo sceicco bianco* as an essentially happy one, a "compromise" in which "Wanda agrees to accept her husband as her 'white shiek' and Ivan forgives his wife's escapade into the dream world" (1984: 117). Yet, Fellini undermines the "happy" ending of a traditional comedy in the final sequence: husband and wife may be reunited in Saint Peter's square, but the spectator is left with considerable doubt about their future together. Pierre Kast, in a review of the film published in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, argued that the film's ending "might be interpreted two ways," and that the "solemn march" toward Saint Peter's for an audience with the pope leaves the spectator with "joyously horrific reservations" about the final scene (qtd. in Fava and Viganò 1987: 60). The ending of Fellini's film is a very early example of one of the trademarks of the *commedia all'italiana*, an unsatisfying conclusion or a misleading happy ending:

[. . .] non c'è quasi mai il lieto fine [. . .] i rari casi di presunto *happy end* sono quasi sempre un inganno, basta una piccola correzione di campo e di veduta a riportare le cose alla più realistica dimensione di pessimismo, come nell'ultima inquadratura di *Divorzio all'italiana*."
(Giacovelli 2002: 92)

In *Divorzio all'italiana*, Fefé achieves the goal of marriage with his beautiful young cousin, Angela, but in the last few moments of the film the camera shows his new

wife playing footsie with another man on the boat during their honeymoon, therefore casting doubt on Angela's fidelity and the viability of the marriage in the long run. The conclusion of *Lo sceicco bianco* functions in the same manner: "The supreme irony of the film is the characters' belief in their future happiness, and the alert viewer's knowledge of the boring, dismal, regimented lives in store for both" of them (Murray 1976: 46-47).

Lo sceicco bianco thus prefigures the *commedia all'italiana* in a number of ways. Although elements of slapstick comedy are sometimes present, for example when Ivan sullies his face with ink at the police station, the "tragicomic" aspect of *Lo sceicco bianco* that Geneviève Agel identified in a review of the film was a new development in Italian comedy (qtd. in Fava and Viganò 1987: 61), shared by the Steno and Monicelli films analyzed in the first chapter of the present study. The theme of failure that a number of scholars identify with Italian style comedy is also discernible in the unsuccessful honeymoon (Bondanella 2004: 149; Fournier Lanzoni 2008: 42), in the near collapse of Ivan and Wanda's marriage, and in Wanda's comic suicide attempt. The plot of *Lo sceicco bianco*, a marriage crisis and story of infidelity, could also be appropriate for a dramatic film, and therefore Fellini's solo debut is consistent with one of Masolino d'Amico's tenets of the *commedia all'italiana*.⁴⁴ Fellini's comedy of manners also contains a number of topics that will become common in the *commedia all'italiana* of the economic miracle, including miscomprehension between husband and wife, hypocritical

⁴⁴ D'Amico's definition of the *commedia all'italiana* includes the "Trattamento in chiave comica o leggera di un tema che si potrebbe benissimo immaginare svolto in chiave drammatica, o comunque seria" (1985: 40).

attitudes of Italian men towards extramarital affairs, and the extraordinary efforts of ordinary Italians to conform to the expectations of contemporary Italian society, often with tremendous difficulty.⁴⁵

iii. *I vitelloni* (1953): Existential Torpor in the Provinces

Fellini's *I vitelloni* is a comedy of manners much like *Lo sceicco bianco*, but it is noticeably more dramatic and abandons the remnants of classic comedy and the often playful feel of its precursor to assume a more lugubrious tone. In the words of Masolino d'Amico, *I vitelloni* is "troppo amaro, [. . .] troppo crepuscolare per essere definito 'solo' una commedia" (1985: 68), and the novel temper of the film is comparable to some of the darker examples of the future *commedia all'italiana*. *I vitelloni* recounts the unfulfilling lives of a group of idle young Italian men, all of whom shirk responsibility and waste their days at the billiard table, chasing women, and wandering the deserted streets and beaches of a provincial seaside town. The film shares *Lo sceicco bianco*'s critique of propriety and conservatism, and Fellini intimates that the condition of the protagonists is connected to their reluctance to accept the conventional lifestyle embraced by their parents' generation and the lack of opportunities for betterment in terms of employment and living conditions in the static Italian provinces.

⁴⁵ E.g., in Vittorio De Sica's *Il boom* (1961), the protagonist Giovanni Alberti (Alberto Sordi) is constrained to sell one of his eyes to maintain the standard of living to which he and his wife have grown accustomed.

I vitelloni contains multiple protagonists grappling with adulthood, most of whom fail to achieve anything or make any significant changes to their lives during the course of the film. Moraldo, the solemn, introspective member of the bunch, is the only exception, for he eventually decides to leave his hometown for an unknown destination. Much of the action focuses on Fausto and his relationship with Moraldo's sister, Sandra. At the beginning of the film, we discover that Sandra is pregnant with Fausto's child, and the inveterate seducer's father constrains him to marry her. Fausto's inconstancy creates difficulties for the new couple, culminating in Sandra's temporary disappearance when she leaves with their child and heads to Fausto's father's house. Alberto, the *mammone*, lives at home with his mother and sister, and the abrupt departure of his sister, the only source of income in the household, leaves an economic void that he makes no effort to cover before the film's end. Leopoldo, an aspiring playwright, has his dreams dashed by an actor he idolizes who feigns interest in his work in an attempt to seduce him by the shore. Riccardo, the character who receives the least amount of attention during the course of the film, is an opera singer, but his lack of serious musical study or daily practice ultimately gets him nowhere.

With the title of his film, Fellini popularized a regional term now widely used to define a certain kind of shiftless, immature Italian man who does not work and lives parasitically off of his family. Carlo Lizzani elucidates Fellini's neologism as follows:

Con il vocabolo 'vitellone' Fellini vuol definire quel tipo di giovane italiano ambizioso e inconcludente, superficiale e perdigiorno,

Casanova per la strada ma conformista in casa, velleitario e chiacchierone al caffè, ma attaccato alle gonne della mamma e della moglie nel chiuso delle pareti domestiche, che alligna in Italia un po' dappertutto, ma specialmente in provincia. (1992: 157)

Lizzani's description of the term *vitellone* accurately defines the young men in the Fellini film, but the negative aspects of the *vitellone* type also apply to a host of other characters in Italian comedies in the 1950s and 1960s, especially those played by Alberto Sordi, from Fernando Rivoli to the central figures in films such as *Il seduttore* and *Il marito*. Jacqueline Reich claims *I vitelloni* is "one of the earliest *commedia all'italiana*," and that Fellini's protagonists embody what she calls "the *inetto* of the post-war period" (2004: 16). These unproductive characters may have lofty ambitions, but they are rarely capable or disciplined enough to attain their goals. The *inetto*, a mainstay in the *commedia all'italiana*, and "the theme of failure" that some scholars identify in *I soliti ignoti* and subsequent Monicelli films (Fournier Lanzoni 2008: 42; Bondanella 2004: 149), are already present in *Lo sceicco bianco* and *I vitelloni* and set the stage for future Italian style comedies.

The *vitelloni* reflect a number of stereotypical Italian vices, and the satirical or grotesque representation of these foibles is a defining element of the *commedia all'italiana*. In *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*, Silvana Patriarca traces the negative aspects of Italian national character, in both foreign and national writings and discourse over the last two and a half centuries. In her study, she explains that Italians have been defined as "indolent," "effeminate," "immature," and "morally lazy," and that the populace is often

criticized for its “excessive individualism” (2010: 16-19). While Fernando Rivoli touches on a number of these shortcomings in *Lo sceicco bianco*, the young men in *I vitelloni* can be read as the personification of these national vices. The *vitelloni* are lazy and guilty of adolescent behavior; Alberto, in particular, is marked by effeminacy; Fausto’s infidelity and readiness to lie and steal demonstrates a lack of a proper moral compass; and most of them are incapable of looking beyond their own personal interests for the good of their families.

Silvana Patriarca notes that “the new comedies of the 1950s and 1960s [. . .] made the product of *mammismo*, namely the ‘mama’s boy,’ into an object of parody and a laughing matter” (2010: 220). Alberto Sordi’s eponymous character in the film is the quintessential *vitellone* and the one most dependent on the women in his family:

Alberto è [. . .] *il vitellone* per antonomasia. Intreccio di meschinità e infantilismo, vigliaccheria e mammismo, la sua maschera è il prototipo di quella varietà di incarnazioni dell’italiano medio cui darà vita

Alberto Sordi nella sua formidabile carriera. (Minuz 2012: 67)

I vitelloni is one of the first of these “new comedies” to closely target Italian men who take refuge in the mother figure. Alberto is deeply attached to his mom, and his tense relationship with his sister, Olga, is largely due to his worries over potential harm to his mother that may come as a result of her affair with a married man.

During an argument with Olga, Alberto’s comical threat manifests this concern: “Se fai piangere mamma!” Alberto and his mother are economically dependent upon his sister; Olga “is the chief wage earner of the family and in this sense is the ‘man’ of

the house, not Alberto” (Stubbs 2006: 98). Rather than support his mother and sister, he leeches money from Olga and fritters it away at the bar or by gambling on horse races with Riccardo. While his sister works long hours and sometimes suffers through overnight shifts, Alberto never seeks work, even after her departure. His selfishness prevents him from looking beyond his own needs to tend to those of his immediate family. The cinematography inside the apartment he shares with his mother and sister frequently alludes to this egocentricity by isolating him in the *mise-en-scène* by way of doors and partitions, and heavy shadow in the domestic space hints a flawed relationship between Alberto and his close relatives.

Grazia Livi discerns the blend of dramatic and comic registers in Sordi’s representation of Alberto, the “*doppia chiave*” that contributes to the often melancholy tone of *I vitelloni* and is a defining feature of the *commedia all’italiana*:

... da un lato le abitudini puerili che suscitano il riso, l’irresponsabilità scoicca, l’espressione ridicola, torpida, e dall’altro il dramma degli avvenimenti come la fuga della sorella con l’uomo sposato, la solitudine della vecchia madre, l’inutile ubriacatura per carnevale, a cui spetta, invece, un tono di avvilitamento, di dolore grottesco. (1967: 84)

The end of Carnevale and its aftermath is a prime example of the blend of comedy and tragedy in Fellini’s *I vitelloni*. As the night comes to an end, a conspicuous shot of an empty hallway in the building where the party takes place suggests the lonely, squalid existence of Alberto and his cohorts. He attends the event “dressed in a female costume which underlines the effeminate qualities that set him apart from

his strong and self-reliant sister” (Bondanella 2004: 128). The last of the drunken revelers dance to the jarring, dissonant sound of a trumpet; Alberto embraces a large head from a carnival prop and drags it along the ground after looking up at the ceiling in a swirling subjective shot signaling his inebriation. His attachment to the papier mâché head, in particular the moment in which Alberto addresses it directly as “testone mio,” provides a humorous intrusion in an otherwise disconcerting sequence.

Once he leaves the party, the sun has risen outside. Fellini characters frequently come to epiphanic realizations or have significant experiences in the half-light of dawn, and with his inhibitions lowered Alberto reveals self-awareness and expresses a harsh judgment of himself and his friends.⁴⁶ He tells Moraldo that the *vitelloni* are nobodies (“Non siete nessuno”) and that they make him sick (“Mi fate schifo”). Inebriation becomes a recurring element in Alberto Sordi’s comedies; he frequently drinks to forget his problems, but tends to offer insightful comments on himself and others while intoxicated.⁴⁷ Tragedy becomes the dominant mode of the sequence when Olga reveals that she is running away with the married man she has been seeing. Alberto’s difficulty in grasping the situation due to his impairment, the desperate glance at Moraldo, and the close-up of his sweaty face with a pained expression makes the moment deeply moving and provides Sordi with an

⁴⁶ E.g., Augusto scrambles up a rocky slope in the early morning in the conclusion of *Il bidone* (1955) and Marcello reaches the pinnacle of depravity with the revelers by the beach at the end of *La dolce vita* (1960).

⁴⁷ The protagonist of *Il marito* vents about his wife; Alberto expresses his disgust with the consumerist Italy of the economic miracle by spitting at oncoming traffic in *Una vita difficile*; Giovanni berates his friends for failing to help him in his time of need in *Il boom*.

opportunity to demonstrate his skill in dramatic situations. He rushes up the stairwell to his mother, more to seek reassurance than to console her, and the camera pans to the right as he moves toward an empty chair when the conversation turns to the question of employment. Comedy intrudes on drama when Alberto slumps down in the seat in an awkward position and responds to his mother's question about whether or not he has found work yet with a "no."

The famous sequence in which Alberto insults the construction workers on the side of the road as the *vitelloni* pass by in a car highlights their childishness as well as their laziness. Alberto ironically critiques a group of men who work for a living, while he, more than the rest of his cohorts, needs to find a job to support his mother after Olga's departure. Fellini suggests the infantile nature of Alberto, and implicitly the *vitelloni* as a whole, in the close-up shot that accompanies his offensive hand gesture by way of a scarf wrapped tightly around his head that makes him resemble a swaddled infant. As in the conclusion of *I soliti ignoti*, the forms of work that are available in factories and on construction sites are not glamorous and do not provide an opportunity to move up in the ranks.⁴⁸ The lack of choices for employment in this provincial town is a social problem that only encourages the adolescent behavior and escapism of young men like the *vitelloni*.

The conservatism of provincial Italy and the harmful repercussions of societal pressures on Italian youth, especially women, is important to *I vitelloni*. The pariah status ascribed to young unwed mothers we identified in *Totò e Carolina* and

⁴⁸ At the end of *I soliti ignoti*, after the failure of the jewelry heist, Peppe (Vittorio Gassman) unwittingly joins a crowd of men who have gathered to work as unskilled laborers.

the importance of family reputation dictates Sandra's response to her pregnancy. Her fainting spell and subsequent tearful exclamation expressing her wish to die at the Miss Sirena contest is a telling commentary on the common opinion on illegitimate pregnancy in the small seaside town modeled on Rimini in Emilia-Romagna. Frank Burke explains "The subtly self-serving conservatism that underlies the characters' actions is made clear when Fausto's father insists on marriage not to provide a stable family environment for the child but to preserve his 'honor' and that of Sandra's father" (1996: 39). Other comic films that we have considered thus far, namely *Due soldi di speranza* and *Lo sceicco bianco*, have demonstrated how these antiquated taboos about premarital sex and infidelity and the potential damage that may come as a result of the loss of virginity, both to the woman and to her family, persist in postwar Italy, especially in the South and in the provinces. The moment in which two young women approach Sandra soon after the wedding to discuss the hastily arranged ceremony, Fausto's questionable character, and the fact that her baby is hardly showing demonstrates how quickly such news spreads in provincial areas and how little choice women like Sandra possess in similar circumstances.

The narrator identifies Fausto as "capo" and "guida spirituale" of the *vitelloni*, but ironically he is the most puerile and despicable of the group. A shameless womanizer, he ogles and pursues new conquests wherever he goes before and after he marries Moraldo's sister, Sandra, and despite the birth of his first child. From the brazen attempt to hit on his boss' wife in the storeroom while Michele speaks with representatives of the Church making purchases in the front of the relic shop, to the

affair with a dancer in a variety theater group passing through town, Fausto's behavior is consistently deplorable throughout the film. He often reveals his immaturity through infantile gestures, for example when he shadowboxes to celebrate his minor success with the woman he follows from the movie theater or when he takes an imaginary dive after one of his sleazy efforts to seduce Michele's wife. His solution to dealing with Sandra whenever she is distraught is to cry like a child in order to earn her sympathy. Fausto's juvenile outburst at the dinner table ("Ho trent'anni!") in response to a scolding from Moraldo's father comically highlights the incongruity between the age and the comportment of the so-called leader of the *vitelloni*.

Near the end of the film, Fausto's father beats him with a belt, the sort of punishment a father doles out to a naughty child. According to Carlo Lizzani, the scene

arricchisce e definisce la figura del vitellone [un ragazzo, grande e grosso, che va trattato come un ragazzino, così come merita il suo cervello piccolo e mediocre]. (1992: 159).

Although the thrashing of Fausto could have been treated dramatically given the circumstances and the violence of the attack, a comic tone dominates throughout the sequence. Fausto cowers and pleads with his father using the infantile term "babbo," during the beating his little sister Mirellina laughs from outside the room, and right afterward an elated Michele Corti introduces himself to the man responsible for the belt lashing with "Mi chiamo Michele Corti. Onoratissimo." Fausto's actions throughout the course of the film suggest that the juvenile

philanderer is unlikely to learn from the experience, and that Sandra must be “prepared to play the role of the stern parent to Fausto’s delayed adolescent” for there to be any hope of saving the marriage (Stubbs 2006: 97). This mother and child relationship is common in Sordi’s rapport with women in a number of other comedies from the mid to late 1950s, as we shall see in an analysis of *Il seduttore*.

Fausto’s reluctance to assume any form of responsibility is made clear by his attitude toward his marriage to Sandra and the job his father-in-law procures for him. During the wedding ceremony, in a medium shot of the bride and groom kneeling in front of the altar, Fausto responds to Sandra’s smile with a strained expression that conveys his displeasure over the event. The humorous marriage sequence in *I vitelloni* is echoed in the opening scene of Nanni Loy’s *Il marito* and Alberto Sordi’s protagonist in *Lo scapolo* shares Fausto’s disinclination to tie the knot. Ironically the iniquitous Fausto is hired to work in a shop selling religious relics owned by a friend of his father-in-law. His comic disgust for the post is communicated through his reaction to the chore coat Michele gives him for his first day on the job; Fausto smells each of the sleeves and hesitates as he slowly makes his way into the stockroom. The carnivalesque soundtrack, a lighthearted theme frequently paired with the antics of the various protagonists throughout the course of the film, contributes to the comic effect of Fausto’s aversion to work.

The scene that takes place at the movie theater raises a number of issues that will become central to the *commedia all’italiana*, including consumerism, social status, and expectations about the roles of husband and wife in traditional middle-class families. Sandra is attuned to new opportunities for consumption becoming

available in the early 1950s and her first observation about the film after finding a seat in the theater comically concerns a kitchen appliance she notices on screen that Fausto then promises to acquire in the future:

SANDRA. Che bel frigorifero!

FAUSTO. Ce lo faremo anche noi.

The concerns of aspiring middle-class families now include household items that not only make daily life easier, but also serve as symbols for varying degrees of *arrivismo*. The list of electronics and labor-saving devices Italian families hope to purchase increases in the comic films of the 1950s as the economic boom approaches. *I vitelloni* hints at what will soon become “the frantic attempts of comic or satirized masculinity to keep up with the consumerist demands of marriage in a new era” typical of the *commedia all’italiana* (Günsberg 2005: 68). Despite the fact that Fausto assures his young wife that they too will have a fridge of their own, Sandra’s subsequent discussion of the addition to her parent’s house to accommodate the newlyweds makes it clear that Fausto will not be earning enough to support his bride or his child without help anytime soon. The juxtaposition of an older woman seated in the row in front of them wearing an opulent fur, “a visible sign of leisured bourgeois feminine status” (Günsberg 2005: 84), with this young couple makes Fausto’s failure to live up to the expectations of the patriarch and breadwinner all the more apparent.

The local environment serves as a symbol for the *vitelloni* and their bleak existence, from the desolate streets in the center of town at night to the austere

landscape they pass while searching for Sandra in a car Riccardo borrows from his family. The deserted beach and the pier is the most iconic of these images.

The desolate shore during the off-season and the sound of the wind metaphorically represent the spiritual torpor of these permanent adolescents, and Enrico Giacovelli identifies the beach as one of a number of “luoghi della solitudine dell’individuo” that *I vitelloni* shares with the *commedia all’italiana* in which “l’uomo avverte di essere una parte marginale e insignificante dell’universo” (2002: 84-85). The empty changing stations in the background of the sequence contribute to the lonely environment, and the cinematography as they leave the pier reflects their idle lifestyle; after they decide to go find Giudizio and watch him fish, the camera follows their slow movement in a long, sluggish pan to the right that follows them from the pier to the shoreline.

Fellini also reflects on *I vitelloni* by placing a number of curious, unfinished structures in the composition of various sequences throughout the film. For example, when Fausto and Sandra return from their honeymoon with a gramophone record player, the mise-en-scène of the shot of Alberto and Fausto dancing to the diegetic music includes construction workers and scaffolding in the background. Later on, a skeletal wooden frame is paired with Fausto in a medium shot and subsequent close-up when he walks along the beach with a bicycle while searching desperately for Sandra after she leaves with the baby. These half-finished constructions embody the empty, incomplete, and unfulfilled lives of the protagonists, a group of young men who have made few significant achievements since reaching adulthood.

The boredom in the changeless province ultimately contributes to Moraldo's decision to leave Rimini in search of a better alternative in the film's conclusion. The train links the remote beach town to the nation's urban centers and points toward parts of the peninsula undergoing significant change in the 1950s, the Rome where Alberto boasts of connections and Fausto and Sandra spend their honeymoon. Although the protagonist's destination is unspecified, the previous mention of Rome in *I vitelloni* and the autobiographical aspect of Federico Fellini's film suggest that Moraldo is headed toward the nation's capital. The coastal province is presented as a vestige of an old-fashioned Italy that offers few enticing opportunities to a younger generation of Italians. The subjective shots of Moraldo's friends in bed communicates that their lives will remain much the same if they do not leave their provincial home. In light of the protagonists of the *commedia all'italiana*, Moraldo's departure might be read as the background story for scores of Italians seeking to take advantage of new possibilities made available by the economic development and modernization of the nation's major cities. *I vitelloni* signals the move from the provinces, the "strapaese" often associated with traditional comedies and pink neorealism (Giacovelli 1990: 12), to Rome, Milan and other urban centers that serve as the milieu for the protagonists of the *commedia all'italiana*.

With its combination of tragedy and comedy and the lack of a traditional happy ending, Fellini once again overturns the conventions of classic comedies in *I vitelloni* and provides prime examples of the *inetto*, the common protagonist of Italian style comedies. Marriage does not ensure a positive outcome for Fausto and Sandra, and Fellini shows that following accepted traditions is not a proper solution

to an existential problem. In the cinema of Fellini, the key to greater happiness lies in personal growth and not in social customs and conformity. This concept is not alien to the *commedia all'italiana* proper, for many of the comedies of the economic boom suggest that material goods, sexual conquest, job prosperity and social status do not necessarily translate to overall happiness, even if the protagonists are up to the task of attaining them. Sordi's protagonists in future Italian comedies draw from the puerility of Alberto and Fausto in *I vitelloni* and their reluctance or inability to support their families and live up to expectations for middle class respectability as consummate *inetti*. Although Fellini's film takes place in the provinces, it bears directly on the urban comedies of the mid to late 1950s.

iv. *Il seduttore* (1954): Alberto as Middle-Class *vitellone*

Il seduttore (1954), directed by Franco Rossi, is the first of a string of films in which Alberto Sordi interprets various categories of the *italiano medio*, from *Il marito* and *Il vedovo* to *Il moralista* and *Il vigile*, and it also marks Sordi's first encounter with Rodolfo Sonego, the screenwriter who would become his closest collaborator during the course of a long career in Italian cinema. According to Masolino d'Amico, *Il seduttore* is an important step in the direction of the *commedia all'italiana*, as it is "il primo a dare la misura delle possibilità di impiego di Sordi in una chiave meno grottesca e più realistica e contemporanea" (1985: 70). Here Sordi's *vitellone* type leads a more respectable middle-class lifestyle, as Alberto is married and holds a modest position at an insurance agency, but he still displays

many of the negative qualities we identified in his characters in early Fellini films, in particular childishness and ineptitude. *Il seduttore* is consistent with Enrico Giacovelli's description of the *commedia all'italiana* as a form of comedy that engages with contemporary Italian society and assumes a critical position toward it (2002: 92). While *I vitelloni* largely satirizes a set of long-standing Italian vices in the isolation of the provinces, *Il seduttore* transfers these foibles to a modern Rome on the verge of the economic boom. The film touches on contentious issues such as tax evasion, divorce, and the unscrupulousness of Italian entrepreneurs, a series of recurring topics in the full-fledged Italian style comedy.

In *Il seduttore*, Alberto feigns expertise in the ways of women, but his attempts at seduction result in costly blunders rather than successful amorous exploits. Alberto's first target is a seemingly wealthy French woman named Jacqueline who complains of her husband's neglect and of her mother's poor health. Alberto, seeking to earn her favor, recommends that she bring her mother to Italy so that her husband will have no choice but to take care of the elderly woman. Jacqueline coaxes an unwitting Alberto into helping her and her mother monetarily after the husband abandons them both as a result of his advice. Alberto then uses a business trip to Paris as an excuse to spend time alone with Jacqueline, for he erroneously assumes that his financial assistance will lead to a payoff. Alberto stays in Rome instead of leaving the country and rents a room so as to avoid his wife's interference. Jacqueline leaves town without telling Alberto, and when he goes to pick up his car he discovers that the mechanic in charge of his family vehicle has loaned it to an American woman living in Fregene with her two children. Alberto

views the situation as a new opportunity and decides to personally retrieve his automobile. The American woman's husband is a pilot, and Alberto misinterprets her complaints about her husband's long absences as an invitation for an extramarital affair. Alberto pretends to be in town on business looking into a false insurance claim and temporarily rents a room in her seaside villa. Although she spurns his advances, the husband returns and sees Alberto coming from her living quarters late one night before he leaves for Rome. At this point, Jacqueline is under the impression that Alberto fancies her enough to leave his wife. She and her mother begin eating meals regularly at the restaurant run by Alberto's wife, Norma, and his mother-in-law. Norma understands that something is awry, and things come to a head when the American woman seeks out Alberto at the restaurant to convince him to help explain to her husband that nothing happened between them in order to save her marriage. When all of the women in Alberto's life begin asking questions, Alberto flees while his wife resolves the situation. Norma and Alberto manage to salvage their marriage, but Norma is now intent on closely following her husband's every move.

The sequence that accompanies the opening credits in *Il seduttore* echoes the beginning of *I vitelloni* and suggests the similarity between Sordi's protagonists in the two films. Both begin on city streets at night after shops and restaurants have closed with a group of men idly passing time away from their families. In the Fellini film the eternal adolescents skip along together arm-in-arm through the center of Rimini; in *Il seduttore*, Alberto discusses the physical attributes of women with a colleague as he slowly makes his way to the restaurant run by his wife and mother-

in-law. While his wife works all night serving customers and keeping the restaurant in order, Alberto leisurely strolls around town with friends and acquaintances and boasts of nonexistent affairs and knowledge of exotic women.

The protagonist is characterized by juvenile behavior both inside and outside of the home, while his wife is portrayed as a responsible, maternal figure. Alberto acts like a child in the presence of Norma, to whom he refers solely by the pet name Gigetta, and she often treats him like one. This relationship is made clear when she scrubs Alberto in the bathtub after he returns from the faked departure to France and when she instructs her husband to be mindful of the humidity while he is away. Norma and his mother-in-law are in charge at home and in the restaurant they run on the first floor of the building they live in. Alberto comically complains about the female tyranny in the household by exclaiming, "Foss'io il padrone qui dentro!" in the first scene that takes place inside the domestic space. Alberto carries out a form of minor rebellion by taking down a painting of a clock tower he does not care for hanging in the hallway that his mother-in-law continuously puts back in place. The content of the painting suggests his distaste for rigid schedules and the strictures of adult life.

The camerawork in the first scene that takes place in the couple's home establishes the fact that Norma works much harder than Alberto. When the protagonist returns home after wandering the city streets, his wife is busy taking care of the finances and informs her husband that she covered the latest payment on the family car. The camera lingers on Norma after Alberto heads upstairs in a medium close-up as she makes calculations with her fingers while seated at a table

in the restaurant to highlight her industriousness. Norma continues to work downstairs while Alberto sleeps, and the cinematography effectively juxtaposes their two lifestyles, one of labor and the other of adolescent leisure, by framing Alberto soundly sleeping on one side of the bed and then panning to the empty space his wife would occupy to the right. Afterward, the scene cuts to Norma downstairs as she collects the cash from the table, an action that suggests she is the more substantial breadwinner of the household, and slowly moves through the restaurant to straighten the chairs before turning in for the night.

Alberto's adolescent habits and irresponsible behavior continue throughout the film and a number of other characters treat the protagonist like a child. The following morning, he lambasts a housemaid for waking him up despite the fact that he must show up for work at the office. The housemaid brings him breakfast in bed, provides his clothes for the workday, and addresses him as "signorino," a term more appropriate to a spoiled child than a full-grown man. When he arrives at the insurance office, the female employees are more industrious than the men; a secretary admonishes Alberto and his colleagues for chatting and not getting anything done: "Il lavoro comincia anche per voi, no?" Later on, while Alberto spends time with Jacqueline in her hotel room, the editing brings attention to the effects of his absence in the office by cross-cutting to the workplace; one of the secretaries complains to her colleagues about having to complete all of his work while he is away.

Alberto's shortcomings as an *inetto* are manifest in his family situation and in the layout of his shared home. Jacqueline Reich observes "that public space in Italy

has been traditionally coded as masculine in an attempt to differentiate itself from the private, domestic, feminine sphere” (2004: 4-5). Although women in Italy made progress towards greater freedom in the 1950s, the Catholic Church continued to strongly support conservative family values and encouraged women to assume the role of wife and mother. The fact that Norma works harder than her husband and that her workplace is adjacent to her home suggests that Alberto’s failure to grow up, assume responsibility, and pull his weight financially has altered the traditional Catholic family structure. Norma performs multiple roles: she is the chief source of income, a wife, and a mother figure. Furthermore, she and her husband have no children together, as Norma already has her hands full with Alberto. The ineptitude of the would-be seducer is apparent both by the lack of success of his attempts to coax women into bed and in his failure to live up to expectations as a virile patriarch in his own home.

Enrico Giacobelli observes that cars become “lo status-symbol per eccellenza” in the *commedia all’italiana* (1990: 107), and *Il seduttore* provides an early example of this function of automobiles in Italian comedies. The fact that Alberto and his wife possess their own motor vehicle is a sign of financial success, especially at the time of the film’s release in 1954, just before the surge in production and ownership of automobiles that accompanied the economic boom in Italy. Guido Crainz estimates that in 1954 there were roughly 700,000 cars on the road; by 1964 the number increased to nearly five million (2005: 142). The local mechanic who allows Alberto to park in his repair shop assumes that the vehicle opens up opportunities for sexual liaisons unavailable to those without their own

means of transport. He asks Alberto who he picks up in the car at night: “Ma chi ci porta a notte in macchina dottò?” The automobile is associated with economic status and also with greater freedom, as it permits Italian men to temporarily escape from the confines of the home. The mechanic’s question in *Il seduttore* prefigures an episode from Dino Risi’s *I mostri* (1963) entitled “Vernissage” in which the association between automobiles and extramarital opportunities is made even more explicit. In the Risi film, Ugo Tognazzi acquires a new family car and his first drive entails a trip to the park to pick up a prostitute with his newfound freedom.

Alberto’s response to Jacqueline’s question about whether or not Italians pay high taxes provides a telling commentary on the prevalent attitude toward taxation and by extension the long-standing antagonism between individual Italian citizens and the state. Maurizio Grande cites this “*scollamento storico fra individuo e società*” as a staple of the *commedia all’italiana*, the detachment between the individual and any form of responsibility to a collective national body (2003: 44). In *A History of Contemporary Italy*, Paul Ginsborg explains that avoidance of taxes was a persistent problem for the republic: “From shopkeepers to lawyers, massive tax evasion was the order of the day” (Ginsborg 1990: 330). Alberto’s comical retort, a single utterance (“Uh!”), might be read a number of ways and succinctly captures the *italiano medio*’s stance on taxation.⁴⁹ The comedies of the economic boom frequently satirize the individualism and lack of a sense of civic and national duty in Italian society, and the outlook on taxation is a direct consequence of these attitudes.

⁴⁹ E.g., taxes are too high in Italy, Italians do not pay them if they can get around it, those who actually pay them are fools, etc.

The *arte d'arrangiarsi* common in neorealist comedies persists in the *commedia all'italiana* and assumes a new form more appropriate to Italy's increasing economic prosperity. While Totò manages to get by through clever tricks and petty thievery in the absence of employment in films such as *Fermo con le mani* and *Guardie e ladri*, seemingly legitimate entrepreneurs and middle class Italians often increase their earning potential through dishonest business practices in the films of the *commedia all'italiana*. Maurizio Grande explains that in the way of life dictated by the “scollamento tra individuo e società,”

ciascuno è tenuto a far fronte singolarmente e anarchicamente ai problemi quotidiani, con le risorse della inveterata ‘arte di arrangiarsi’ inventando trucchi, confezionando truffe, architettando soluzioni paralegali o dichiaratamente illecite, sia sul piano sociale e sia sul piano morale, per sopravvivere. (2003: 44)

With increasing prosperity during the years leading up to the economic boom, *Il seduttore* demonstrates that the expedients of postwar pickpockets in neorealist comedies have evolved into more elaborate wiles and questionable ventures by the mid-1950s. Jacqueline's husband appears to be a prosperous businessman, as his elegant French wife, his formal dress, and an entourage lead to assumptions about his wealth and prestige. A mechanic in the garage refers to the man as “commendatore,” an official title granted by the republic typically reserved for esteemed professionals. These designations are often used ironically in Italian style comedies; in *Il seduttore* the man's fraudulent business practices are revealed when Alberto seeks him out at a luxury hotel. While discussing the sale of fabric with a

group of other men, he suggests soaking it to increase its weight in response to comments about the inferior quality of the textile. When Jacqueline's ex reappears at end of the film, the entrepreneur is out of money and expects Alberto to cover his tab. The "commendatore" has built a respectable façade by manipulating the *bella figura*, but in reality he is nothing more than a swindler.

As we have seen in a number of other Italian comedies from the 1950s, the portrayal of the representatives of the Church is not altogether positive in *Il seduttore*. Alberto has a close relationship with an influential monsignor who helps him earn a spot on a business trip to Paris in exchange for his assistance in selling a used American car owned by a couple of German priests. The ease with which the monsignor gets Alberto's name on the list for the trip demonstrates the deep connections of the Church and provides an example of the clientelistic practices that were rife in Italy at the time. The possession of the American car by the German clergyman, a symbol of luxury and affluence, also raises questions about the Church's coffers and the necessity of some of their expenditures. The monsignor is not as offensive as the local priest in *Due soldi di speranza* or as naïve as the one who fails to offer any useful aid or advice to Carolina in *Totò e Carolina*, but *Il seduttore* points to the excessive weight of the Catholic Church in daily life in Italy in the 1950s and intimates that the current state of the nation is at least in part due to its activities and widespread influence.

Il seduttore raises the issue of divorce and points out the fact that Italy is behind the times with respect to neighboring European countries. The spectator discovers that Alberto lied to Jacqueline and told her that he plans to divorce his

wife in order to be with her during a discussion between Jacqueline and her mother over dinner. Alberto's lie is humorous, since divorce was not an option in Italy at the time the film was made and Jacqueline and her mother are none the wiser, but it also juxtaposes the conservatism of Italian marriage laws with the relative freedom of French citizens. While divorce had been legal in modern France since 1884, a divorce bill was not introduced in Italy until 1965, and predictable opposition from the Christian Democrats and "fierce attack by the church hierarchy" delayed its ratification until 1970 (Ginsborg 1990: 328). Norma also brings up the subject when Alberto returns from his fake trip to Paris by asking, "Di' un po', c'è sempre il divorzio in Francia?" Norma's comment unsettles the dishonest Alberto, but it also hints to the spectator that divorce might be justifiable for a woman in her position if the husband is as mendacious or pathetic as Sordi's protagonist.

Alberto's various attempts at seduction are comical due to the contrast between his efforts to appear wealthy and accomplished, and the underlying weak *inetto* Jacqueline Reich associates with Italian comedy. Alberto attempts to maintain an air of sophistication and male potency through careful attention to his wardrobe and discourse. When he brings Jacqueline to a high-class bar for a drink, he is meticulously dressed in a striped, double-breasted suit, and he feigns extensive knowledge of French language and culture by utilizing the few French terms he knows and by ordering champagne. Yet he ultimately bumbles his efforts to bed the women he pursues. When Jacqueline invites him up to her room to ask him for money, the elated Alberto trips multiple times on the way up the stairs and an older woman calls attention to his childishness by urging him to be careful: "Sta' attento

giovanotto.” The *inetto* beneath the façade is truly uncovered when he tries to lure the American woman in Fregene down to the beach. When he removes his clothing and dons a bathing suit, his not-so-toned body does not entice the American woman when he invites her to accompany him on a late night swim. When she declines, Alberto insists on heading for the beach to save face, but he is so out of shape that he must be pulled from the water by a couple of bystanders, and therefore his attempt to demonstrate strength and virility by swimming in the cold ocean at night is literally sunk by ineptitude.

Il seduttore deflates the concept of the Latin lover and portrays Italian men as dreamers and voyeurs rather than successful philanderers. In one of many instances of scopophilia, the men at the office pass around binoculars to leer at a woman’s legs through the window of an adjacent office building. Alberto’s boss, the “ragioniere,” is one of the most pathetic of these men in the film. He hopes to organize an “orgy” in his apartment with Alberto’s help while he has the place to himself. This middle-aged, unmarried man lives with his sister and is incapable of wooing a woman on his own. After Jacqueline arrives, he seedily smells her overcoat while she is in the other room. The mechanic who brings the spare tire for the used car Alberto sells to Jacqueline’s husband leers at two attractive foreign women as they leave the hotel. Italian men in *Il seduttore* claim expertise in the ways of women, but their discourse is either inaccurate or absurd and reveals ignorance rather than knowledge of the opposite sex. The aged colonel renting a room in the American woman’s villa claims that she would be willing to sleep with the first man bold enough to take her down to the rocks by the beach alone, but she remains loyal to her husband during the

course of the film, and when Alberto and his boss stop by a local cafe to stock up on liquor and snacks for the night with Jacqueline and a friend who never appears (and whom Alberto most likely never called), the barista discourages cream-filled pastries because he maintains that they could reduce their chances of a successful evening with the ladies. These men boast of conquests and firsthand knowledge with their friends, but they are often fabricated.

Maggie Günsberg argues that the Italian “Everyman” of the *commedia all’italiana* “[serves] to ensure that masculinity and its interests dominate the screen, to the exclusion of feminine point of view” (2005: 62). Although *Il seduttore* concentrates primarily on the negative attributes of the protagonist and the rest of the men in the film, the ending is a notable exception to Günsberg’s generalization. Here Alberto’s ineptitude and subservient role in the marriage is communicated through Norma’s control over the final scene. After the protagonist’s cowardly escape from the restaurant, the concluding sequence begins with an establishing shot of the sea and a tilt up the shoreline of a crowded beach. Alberto is no longer protagonist in the film’s conclusion, as the camera assumes the point of view of his wife and the voiceover reflects her subjectivity. Norma explains to the spectator that she forgave Alberto, but that she will no longer leave him alone and plans to monitor his actions closely. Norma is seated in a folding chair along the beach, and the camera follows Alberto from her perspective as she watches him approach the water. A couple of women in bathing suits pass by and Alberto observes them, but Norma’s scrutiny and subjective “Ricominciamo?” stop Alberto in his tracks. The would-be seducer has relinquished power to his wife in the marriage. His childish

calisthenics and an awkward dive into shallow water reflect the character of this consummate *inetto*. *Il seduttore* demonstrates that the woman is the stronger and more virtuous of the sexes; the puerile husband ultimately acquiesces to the wishes of the wife, mother, and authority figure.

By the mid 1950s a number of Alberto Sordi's personas, born out of Fernando Rivoli and the *vitellone* of the early Fellini films, possessed all of the negative characteristics ascribed to the protagonists of the *commedia all'italiana*. Enrico Giacobelli interprets Antonio Pietrangeli's *Lo scapolo* (1955), Sordi's subsequent film exploring another category of *italiano medio* after *Il seduttore*, as an important milestone:

protagonista non è più l'eroe del borgo . . . ma un attivissimo
commerciante di elettrodomestici, un borghese in ascesa che
partecipa al nascente boom economico. (2002: 85-86)

Alberto's job in the insurance office in *Il seduttore*, his meticulous attention to clothing and discourse for the sake of a *bella figura*, his proud ownership of an automobile, albeit subsidized by his wife's earnings from the restaurant, and the beach vacation in the film's conclusion demonstrate that the middle-class Italian was on the rise in Italian theaters by 1954 and that his preoccupations were already those of the *italiano medio* of the economic boom.

Sordi acknowledged an important lesson he learned from Fellini during the filming of *I vitelloni* that connects many of his protagonists of the *commedia all'italiana* to the trends in Italian comedy we identified in certain postwar films

starring Antonio De Curtis as well as in certain doleful characters and dramatic moments in *Due soldi di speranza*:

[. . .] Federico mi aiutò a capire che un personaggio, anche più contenuto, può funzionare benissimo [. . .] Non c'è bisogno che uno punti solo sui momenti comici per far ridere il pubblico, in realtà ci possono essere dei momenti seri a cui uno si interessa ugualmente. M'insegnò che lo spettacolo è proprio così com'è la nostra vita: ha i momenti allegri e i momenti dolorosi, un po' di tutto. (qtd. in Livi 1967: 84)

By attenuating pure comedy and incorporating both the highs and lows typical of everyday life, Sordi understood that he could communicate effectively with Italian audiences and convey the weaknesses of the *italiano medio*. The temper of the Carnevale sequence and the departure of Olga in *I vitelloni* reverberates in the tragic moments of future Italian style comedies, from Mario Monicelli's *La grande guerra* (1959) to the failures and frustrations of Silvio Magnozzi in Dino Risi's *Una vita difficile* (1961). The connection between a miserable reality and comedy that inspired the cinema of Totò persists in Sordi's scrutiny of the pettiness, squalidness, and opportunism of quotidian existence in Italy just before and during the economic miracle. Alberto Sordi, together with Federico Fellini, had effaced what Peter Bondanella describes as "the sometimes facile and optimistic humanitarianism typical of neorealist comedy" of the past and "replaced" it with "a darker, more ironic and cynical vision of Italian life," the signature of the *commedia all'italiana* (Bondanella 2004: 145).

“La comicità italiana è tragica: si ride su quello che si può” (Monicelli 1985: 155).

Conclusion

This study of a selection of Italian comedies from the 1950s has challenged the harsh criticism to which these films have often been subject. Sandro Zambetti, an Italian film critic, dismissed the entire decade as follows:

The fifties represent the worst period in the history of the Italian cinema—with the exception of fascism. It was a period of so-called pink neorealism, of “Love, Bread, and . . .” [sic] of “Poor but Beautiful,” of flat composite films put together for a fast profit. The Italian cinema was pervaded by a mystifying optimism, escapism, and happy misery. [. . .] Not too many films deserve to be remembered. (qtd. in Liehm 1984: 138)

While the consensus view of Italian cinema in the 1950s still largely reflects the bias of critics like Zambetti who see it as the disappointing aftermath of neorealism, this study has shown that a considerable number of comedies draw from the lesson of the *cinema impegnato* of the immediate postwar period and engage with Italian society, offering incisive critiques of contemporary Italy that pinpoint hypocrisy, inequality, and a host of other ills of the republic in the 1950s.

The thematic and stylistic innovations of many of these comedies also directly influence the *commedia all'italiana* and the works of renowned Italian auteurs in 1960s. For example, *Due soldi di speranza*, one of the most unfairly judged

and misread films in the history of Italian cinema, brings attention to anachronistic social mores, the mistreatment of women in the South and the relationship between family honor, reparatory marriages and the codice Rocco; I have argued that Renato Castellani's work provides an obvious template for Pietro Germi's *Sedotta e abbandonata* and *Divorzio all'italiana*. The cinematography in Steno and Monicelli's *Guardie e ladri* scrutinizes Rome's periphery and the unofficial *borgate* inhabited by the city's most impoverished citizens and makes these disconcerting locations central to its denunciation of the inadequate response of Italian institutions to the housing crisis and the plight of the Roman poor. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma*, investigations of peripheral Rome and urban development, owe much to Mario Bava's groundbreaking camerawork in *Guardie e ladri*.

The analyses in this dissertation also demonstrate that the primary characteristics of the *commedia all'italiana* were present before the movement's canonical start date of 1958, the year of Mario Monicelli's *I soliti ignoti*. From the beginning of his career on stage in the *avanspettacolo* and in many of his most memorable films, Totò based comedy on miserable circumstances, blended humor and tragedy, and often incorporated elements of the macabre and the grotesque. His collaborations with Steno and Monicelli approach tendentious topics, including postwar poverty, hunger, and the housing crisis, and target the callousness of Italian institutions and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. These films contributed an unprecedented degree of bitterness and cynicism to Italian comedy. Castellani set the stage for Pietro Germi's motion pictures focusing on the backwardness of Southern Italy in the 1960s. As an actor, Vittorio De Sica arguably introduced a

number of the negative aspects of *italianità*, the exaggerated *bella figura* and a hint of duplicity, that were later embraced by the anti-heroes of the *commedia all'italiana* and utilized in caricatures of Italian politicians and lawyers in Italian style comedies. His interpretation of the Marshal Carotenuto character in *Pane, amore e fantasia* displays many of these foibles. *Poveri ma belli* confirms the departure of popular film comedy from the Italian countryside for the nation's urban centers. Dino Risi's film also manifests increasing visibility of women and the body on screen, tension between old-fashioned mores and the beliefs of a younger generation of Italians growing up after the war, and a new level of vulgarity as film comedy moved beyond the peak of Italian film censorship in the mid 1950s and catered to the changing tastes of national audiences.

This study reveals that Federico Fellini was not only an innovative auteur but also an influential comic filmmaker. *Lo sceicco bianco* was ahead of its time, as Fellini's solo directorial debut foregrounds the negative aspects of nearly every character portrayed on screen in a manner consonant with the most caustic examples of the future *commedia all'italiana*. The subject matter, the high cost of conformity and the lack of communication and understanding between husband and wife, looks toward many of the popular films made during the economic boom. Fernando Rivoli, the unscrupulous actor from the *fotoromanzo* in *Lo sceicco bianco*, and the *vitelloni* established the eternal adolescent, the *inetto*, as a permanent feature in Italian comic cinema. The dramatic aspects of these early Fellini films, *I vitelloni* in particular, confirm that the tragicomedy ascribed to the *commedia all'italiana* was already established by the early 1950s.

Carlo Calabrese explains that “Alberto Sordi rimane, insieme al grande Totò, l’attore e la maschera più moderna e rivoluzionaria del cinema italiano” (2010: 7). While the recalcitrant Totò was essentially a positive, sympathetic protagonist, Sordi became the anti-hero of Italian comic cinema. He was particularly talented at satirizing national vices, including *mammismo*, vanity, and shiftlessness, and by the mid-1950s the *vitellone* figure had evolved into the *italiano medio* of a changing nation. *Il seduttore*, made in 1954, essentially critiqued the values of the Italy of the economic boom even before it officially arrived. The contrast between outward appearances, the importance of the *bella figura*, swagger, the semblance of social and economic success, on the one hand, and the underlying lack of moral values, cowardice, and ineptitude of the Sordi character, on the other, affirmed that the features of the central figure of the *commedia all’italiana* had been born.

This study has spoken in defense of Totò, of early Fellini and Alberto Sordi, and of *neorealismo rosa*. Italian films, especially comic ones, have a great deal to say about Italy in the 1950s. Tragedy was an important component of many of the comedies from the period surveyed in this study. Initially it took the form of postwar misery, a vestige of neorealism and a common topic in Totò’s more serious films from the late 1940s and early 1950s. As the nation recovered from the difficulties of the postwar period, the distressing aspects of Italian comedy began to change to reflect the social and spiritual malaise of a new phase in Italian history. This dissertation has demonstrated that the uniquely bitter, unsettling brand of humor associated with the *commedia all’italiana* was born out of the problems and discontents of Italy represented and satirized on screen throughout the fifties.

Comedy provided a constructive outlet for political and moral criticism and reached out to national audiences at a time when the conservative elements in Italian society did their best to hinder the efforts of filmmakers to touch on contentious issues.

Many of the finest examples of Italian film comedy were produced during the 1950s, and these innovative motion pictures ultimately had a profound effect on the future of Italian cinema.

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