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Dung on the Red Carpet: The Image of Peasants in Bernardo Bertolucci's *1900* and Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*

*Gnojowica na czerwonym dywanie. Wizerunek chłopów
w filmach Bernardo Bertolucciego 1900 i Ermanno Olmiego Drzewo na saboty*

ABSTRACT

This article places Bernardo Bertolucci's *Novecento* (1976) and Ermanno Olmi's *L'albero degli zoccoli* (1978) in dialogue to analyze the image of peasants that these films offer. It demonstrates that the 1970s were a period of intense liminality for Italy, something which influenced substantially the formation and production of the image of peasants in these films. Firstly, we explore contingent issues of the period, including the exhaustion of the economic miracle, and black and red terrorism, to start unpacking the peasant image constructed in the films. Subsequently, we use the standpoints of machinery, landscape and historical movement to show that the directors wielded this image to confront the encroaching process of modernization of Italian society. Finally, we expose and reflect on certain illusory claims of historical authenticity which are built on a *schemata* of stereotypes and which confirm that the 1970s were an influential phase for peasant

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imagery. Many of these issues continue to haunt us today. This research, then, enriches our analytical toolbox for the history and future dynamics of peasant studies, intruding disciplines which span from Italian history to film studies.

Key words: peasant film, peasants, modernity, Italy, liminality, Bernardo Bertolucci, Ermanno Olmi

STRESZCZENIE

W niniejszym artykule porównujemy filmy Bernardo Bertolucciego *Novecento* (1976) i Ermanno Olmiego *L'albero degli zoccoli* (1978), aby przeanalizować wizerunek chłopów przedstawiony w tych filmach. Pokazujemy, że lata siedemdziesiąte XX w. były dla Włoch okresem intensywnej liminalności, co miało znaczący wpływ na kształtowanie się i przedstawianie wizerunku chłopów w tych filmach. Po pierwsze, badamy kwestie związane z tym okresem, w tym wyczerpanie się cudu gospodarczego oraz czarny i czerwony terroryzm, aby rozpocząć analizę wizerunku chłopów przedstawionego w filmach. Po drugie, wykorzystujemy punkty widzenia związane z maszynami, krajobrazem i ruchem historycznym, aby pokazać, że reżyserzy wykorzystali ten wizerunek, aby przeciwstawić się postępującemu procesowi modernizacji włoskiego społeczeństwa. Po trzecie, ujawniamy i rozważamy pewne iluzoryczne twierdzenia dotyczące historycznej autentyczności, które opierają się na schematach stereotypów i potwierdzają, że lata siedemdziesiąte XX w. były wpływowym okresem dla wyobrażeń o chłopach. Wiele z tych kwestii nadal nas prześladowuje. Badania te wzbogacają zatem nasz zestaw narzędzi analitycznych dotyczących historii i przyszłej dynamiki studiów nad chłopstwem, wkraczając w dyscypliny obejmujące zarówno historię Włoch, jak i filmoznawstwo.

Słowa kluczowe: film chłopski, chłopci, nowoczesność, Włochy, liminalność, Bernardo Bertolucci, Ermanno Olmi

INTRODUCTION

Peasants have been some of the most marginalized peoples in society. The fact that perspectives on them are often limited reflects a categorical weakness in the scientific literature. Adriano Prospero has recently observed that

‘the gaze that the society of the western and urbanized world brings to nature, with its perception of the agricultural world as a “natural” world, tends to erase the presence of the workers of the land while projecting onto agriculture the colors of a papier-mâché arcadia. In fact, the repressed and erased world that lurks in the depths of our past is a world that is as despised today as it was despised and, at the same time, feared yesterday¹.

¹ A. Prospero, *Un volgo disperso. Contadini d'Italia nell'Ottocento*, Turin 2021, p. xii. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Italian to English are the author's.

Already in 1977, Nuto Revelli's *Il mondo dei vinti* (the world of the defeated) exposed the process of 'industrialization that in the 1960s irreparably disrupted the poor Cuneo countryside', denouncing 'a sick society' which 'yesterday was unable and unwilling to solve the problems of the countryside' and which 'abandon[ed] pockets of depression and misery to their fate, stifling minorities'². The issue applies in many ways to representations of peasants in movies, and, compared to the abundance of studies on many marginalized groups – from LGBT communities to Indigenous Peoples – peasant films have received only relative attention³. Given that there is no shortage of examples that one could think of, the issue may be in part explained as a case of 'invisibility of the obvious'⁴. It is all the more troubling since films have the power to influence the way we think about the past and imagine the future⁵.

In Italy, two peasant films 'par excellence' are *Novecento* (1900) (1976) by the internationally-renowned director Bernardo Bertolucci and *L'albero degli zoccoli* (*The Tree of Wooden Clogs*) (1978) by the less celebrated, at least outside of the national borders, Ermanno Olmi⁶. *1900* tells the story of Alfredo Berlinghieri and Olmo Dalcò. The two protagonists are born on the same day, though on the opposite sides of the 'barricade'. Alfredo is the son of wealthy landowners in the Po Valley, the rural area around Parma (Bertolucci's homeland); Olmo is a bastard born off one of the many female workers in the Dalcò family, who are laborers on the Berlinghieri estate. The plot unfolds against the background of the early phase of mechanization and modernization of agriculture at the start of the twentieth century and reaches the end of the Second World War. The last scene leaps a few decades ahead and portrays

² N. Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti. Testimonianze di cultura contadina. La pianura. La collina. La montagna. Le lanche*, Turin 1997, p. 2.

³ Michele Guerra has offered an excellent analysis of the rural world in films from fascism to the 1970s. M. Guerra, *Gli ultimi fuochi. Cinema italiano e mondo contadino dal fascismo agli anni Settanta*, Rome 2010. For the anglophone world, one noticeable exception is Tom Brass. See T. Brass, *Nymphs, Shepherds, and Vampires: The Agrarian Myth on Film*, "Dialectical Anthropology" 2000, 25, 3–4, pp. 205–237; idem, *Fiends, friends and fools: screen images and/as rural struggle*, "Dialectical Anthropology" 2010, 34, 1, pp. 105–142; idem, *Reel Images of the Land (Beyond the Forest): Film and the Agrarian Myth*, "The Journal of Peasant Studies" 2001, 28, 4, pp. 1–56.

⁴ L. Sciascia, *The Moro Affair*, transl. S. Rabinovitch, London 2013, p. 37.

⁵ On the idea of science fiction influencing innovation and viceversa see also, D. Archibugi, *Blade Runner economics: Will innovation lead the economic recovery?*, "Research Policy" 2017, 46, 3, p. 536.

⁶ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 253; another film that would fit the description is *Padre Padrone* (*My Father, My Master*) (1977) by the Taviani brothers.

the two, now decrepit, friends-enemies jostling each other, just as they used to do when they were children. Against this backdrop, the audience watches some of the main vagaries of Italian modernization: the introduction of machines, the changes in the landscape, the deaths of older generations, fascism, war and social conflicts. Quite differently from *Novecento*, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* is the story of four peasant families living in 1897 in the countryside around Bergamo⁷. Instead of clear-cut protagonists, each family (Batistì, Finardi, Runk, the young couple Stefano and Maddalena) is allotted a similar space-time – it reminds one of the Chinese novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*. The narrative spans a shorter period of time too, covering one year, from summer (which, however, is only barely included⁸) to the end of spring.

Although Olmi's work won the Golden Palm at Cannes in 1978, it remains vastly unknown to international audiences. One possible reason may be that Olmi was snubbed in certain intellectual circles at the time⁹. On the other hand, *1900* by Bertolucci – an artist who has attracted great interest from virtually the beginning of his career¹⁰ – has not yet been studied (in the English language) from the point of view of the peasant image *per se*. In fact, it is curious that the two films, though so different, almost opposite, came out in the same period (1976 and 1978). Indeed, the two films' apparent specularity coupled with the proximity of their production are a useful starting point to develop a dialogue that is 'productive of hermeneutic resources' rather than a facile comparison on schematic or binary lines, which would limit the full potential of this research¹¹. These resources deepen our understanding of the image of peasants in the years under consideration and are apt to reveal how this may or may not have varied over time and place.

As we mentioned, although they both depict peasants, our two films are in many ways specular. The two casts could not be more different. *1900* sports many international stars: Robert De Niro, Gerard De Pardiou, Burt Lancaster, Donald Sutherland, Stefania Sandrelli, Laura Betti and more. The soundtrack was composed by the Italian maestro Ennio Morricone. As the opening of the film, we see the famous painting *Il*

⁷ G.P. Dell'Acqua, *Ermanno Olmi reagisce alle accuse*, in: *L'albero degli zoccoli nell'Italia 1978*, ed. idem, Milan 1979, p. 150.

⁸ S. Giacomoni, *Nel paese della rimozione*, in: *L'albero*, p. 74.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

¹⁰ F. Santovetti, *L'angoscia e la rivoluzione: Bernardo Bertolucci e il cinema di poesia*, "Modern Language Notes" 1993, 108, 1, p. 152.

¹¹ G. Vacca, *Storiografia e vita nazionale. Liberalismo e marxismo nell'Italia del Novecento*, Rome 2022, p. xviii.

Quarto Stato (the fourth estate) by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo. In contrast, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* is played by local peasants. Can anybody honestly be blamed for not considering Luigi Ornaghi (Batisti) or Teresa Brescianini (Runk widow) VIPs? Similarly, the directors' technical intervention is quite the opposite. Bertolucci is clearly 'in our faces', provocatively thanking the peasants in the introductory remarks, while effectively slamming them in the background of the movie. Olmi, on the other hand, attempts to disappear as the film architect. The director hides as the movie creator and reel manipulator, selling us the illusions that *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* is documentary evidence and that he is a neutral observer.

The two movies are specular, the matter seems settled. But is it really so? Or, if we push our inquiry further, do these films reveal similarities that are not immediately apparent? Take periodization, for instance. It is within a cyclical-time that follows the seasonal succession, as has been acutely noted¹², that Bertolucci rendered his movie in order to make its construction evident, highlighting artificiality – just like the market is not a natural state of things but the result of social relations. As said, *1900* opens with *Il Quarto Stato* and is accompanied by Morricone's notes. It then shifts to 25 April 1945, which is Liberation Day in Italy, and then back to the birth of the two children Alfredo and Olmo. Their continuous struggle is the tension that drives the narrative forward. In the same way, Olmi's films follow nature's course. The cycle of seasons forces the passing of time and the moving of the narrative with the four intervals that cover roughly equal times, intersecting with the lives of the four families. In short, though there are substantial differences with filming techniques, usage of metaphors, obtrusiveness of the directors and so on, the time of both films unfolds along the same seasonal lines.

So, what do we discover when we proceed to analyze dialogically *1900* and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*? To answer this question is the goal of this essay. In the first part, a synchronic analysis of 1970s Italy starts to unpack these films and the peasants image contained therein. Given the modernization process that swept the Italian rural world in the two decades after the end of the Second World War, in the second part we continue to reflect on how this impacted the image of peasant communities as can be discerned in these two films. Last, in the third part of the work, we abstract and isolate some of the main elements of what we call a 'peasant *schemata*'; that is, a bundle of stereotypes upon which the image of the peasant (and possibly not just that) was constructed in 1970s Italy, and, with alternating fortunes, is more generally built.

¹² A. Horton, *History as Myth and Myth as History in Bertolucci's 1900*, "Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television" 1980, 10, 1, pp. 10–11.

Evidently, this is not to say that these images can be neatly placed into tight schemes. Rather, it means that certain prejudices are given priority and diminish – without ever flattening them entirely – the spectrum of options available to imagine and think of peasants. The overarching thesis of this article suggests that the 1970s were a focal point for the construction of the contemporary image of peasants in films in Italy. To engage with the longer tradition of Italian peasant films (or even across cultures) is a task with great potential to better situate this ‘turning point’, as Michele Guerra has already shown in his 2008 study¹³, but one which we do not pursue in this piece of work, only engaging with it tangentially.

1970S ITALY: A PERIOD OF LIMINALITY

The late 1970s were a period of liminality for Italy, which translated in acute tension and confusion. To borrow Rosario Forlenza’s words,

‘liminality is a state of uncertainty where events and meaning, indeed reality itself, might develop in a number of directions. Liminality refers to periods of transition in which the usual constraints on thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed, opening the way to new experiences and exercise of the imagination’¹⁴.

Though it is worth remarking the difference between the actual existence of possibility of alternative directions and the perceived or desired space for change (i.e. were there the objective conditions for radical change in Italy in the 1970s or was it a mere illusion?), the concept of liminality nevertheless helps us to introduce the idea that this period of Italian history was chaotic and was one in which there certainly appeared to be several options on the table for the Italian polity. This manifested in many ways.

Politically, the so-called Years of Lead spanned the decade and infested it with red and black terrorism. The Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*, BR) were emblematic of extreme left-wing terrorism. They conducted so-called ‘armed struggle’ (*lotta armata*), shooting in the legs – ‘kneecapping’ (*gambizzare*) – representatives of the State and of the capitalist order. These were accused of being in cahoots to keep the masses of workers, peasants and proletarians enslaved. In March 1978, the year of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* release, Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped and, later, murdered by the BR. In the 1969–1980 period, 362 deaths and 172

¹³ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ R. Forlenza, *On the Edge of Democracy. Italy, 1943–1948*, Oxford 2019, p. 12.

casualties were caused by almost eight thousand violent attacks¹⁵. Around 70% of the overall number of terrorist attacks that were perpetrated between 1968 and 1982 were committed precisely between 1977 and 1979¹⁶. On the far-right side of the political spectrum, neo-fascist terrorists, who were often in collusion with deviated State officials, planned and carried out a series of bombings (think of the Piazza Fontana massacre of 12 December 1969) to foment the so-called 'strategy of tension' (*strategia della tensione*). This developed along symbiotic threats of massacres and coup d'état¹⁷. The orchestrators aimed at fomenting fear to strengthen and stiffen the State apparatus in an authoritarian direction. This, they hoped, would challenge the legitimacy of the existing order (an anti-fascist democratic Republic) and usher in a space of possibilities. They included, under various circumstances and at differing times, even the return in one form or another to the apparent "law and order" of the grim fascist dictatorship¹⁸.

The 1970s were preceded by the 1968 uprisings. In Italy, the unrest – which probably never existed under objective revolutionary conditions – led to a situation of relative instability and high excitement which perdured for a long time. The so-called 'Hot Autumn' (*autunno caldo*), as journalist Indro Montanelli called it, started this phase in 1969. New anti-authoritarian semantics mingled with traditional Marxist vocabulary¹⁹. Immense strikes continued throughout the 1970s. Indicative of the confusion of the situation is the so-called 'rally of the forty thousand' of 1980, when white-collar workers staged a protest against the FIAT industrial workers²⁰. Major social battles were also carried out, such as those for abortion and divorce (more on these below).

The turmoil was not limited to the political level, of course. It reverberated deeper tectonic movements in the economic sphere. The decade opened with the end of the 1944 Bretton Woods agreements. In August 1971, US President Richard Nixon unilaterally ended the conversion of the dollar into gold. The unpegging was the economic conclusion of the great paradigm of the anti-fascist struggle that was created during the Second World War and of the glorious thirty years that had brought

¹⁵ D. Priestland, *The Red Flag. A History of Communism*, New York 2009, p. 496.

¹⁶ F. Barbagallo, *Enrico Berlinguer, il compromesso storico e l'alternativa democratica*, "Studi Storici" 2004, 45, 4, p. 946.

¹⁷ M. Bianco, *Il legame tra piazza Fontana e il "Golpe Borghese" nelle recenti indagini giudiziarie*, "Studi Storici" 2000, 41, 1, p. 47.

¹⁸ R. Chiarini, *Profilo storico-critico del Msi*, "Il Politico" 1989, 54, 3, pp. 369–389.

¹⁹ R. Forlenza, B. Thomassen, *Italian Modernities: Competing Narratives of Nationhood*, New York 2016, p. 211.

²⁰ A. Cozzolino, *Neoliberal Transformations of the Italian State. Understanding the Roots of the Crises*, Lanham MD 2021, p. 65.

the welfare state in Western Europe²¹. The hegemony of the United States, dangerously indebted because, amongst other causes, of the invasion of Vietnam, waned. It should be remembered that hegemony implies the productive capacity of stability and benefits for all parts of a given constellation of forces (hegemonic and subaltern)²². The Nixonian turn was trailed by the 1973 oil micro-crisis.

Tensions characterizing this period of liminality were projected onto the screen, as we can detect in our two peasant films. Obviously, this does not mean that these aimed at exalting the transformations that society was undergoing. Rather, that they took stoke of it, though in different forms. In *1900*, class struggle is the constant pivot on which the narrative rotates. This dichotomous vision of society is evident, for example when Olmo tells Ada, Alfredo's disenchanted and bohemian wife, that 'The masters are enemies. We want to destroy the masters. Alfredo is the master'²³. The syllogism is no different from the one which Moro used to defend the Italian Minister of Defence Luigi Gui during the Lockheed scandal in the mid-1970s. Its categorical and stringent logic reflects the simplification of a society shaken by profound contradictions²⁴. This sublime schematization of reality is also reminiscent of French Maoists' trial of thought represented in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967). We immediately see its limits: Olmo wants to destroy the enemy, Alfredo. But is this really so? No, he wants to destroy the master, not the man. Is this really possible? Again, no. Olmo cannot destroy either Alfredo or the master, which are in effect the same thing. Olmo and Alfredo (the peasant and the master) continue to co-exist in an alternating relation of tense enmity-friendship, squabbling with and needing each other until old age. Similarly, Italian landlords go on being masters – which is historically not that inaccurate²⁵.

Unlike Bertolucci, Olmi chose a strategy that evolved along two lines to reflect the tense situation of 1970s Italy. On the one side, the peasant world of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* is harmonious, without evident social (class) struggle²⁶. There prevail tranquility and peace among men

²¹ G. Vacca, *Quel che resta di Marx. Rileggendo il Manifesto dei comunisti*, Rome 2016, pp. 80–94.

²² G. Vacca, *Modernità alternative. Il Novecento di Antonio Gramsci*, Turin 2017, p. x.

²³ B. Bertolucci (dir.), *Novecento*, Produzioni Europee Associate, Les Productions Artistes Associés, Artemis Film 1976, Second Part (henceforth 2nd), 1h 06'.

²⁴ L. Sciascia, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

²⁵ A. Rossi-Doria, *Il ministro e i contadini. Decreti Gullo e lotte nel Mezzogiorno. 1944–1949*, Rome 1983, p. 152.

²⁶ It should be pointed out, as has already been acutely noted, that there is nonetheless some strife and violence. See: S. Giacomoni, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–73.

and between man and nature. All of this drudges on under the benevolent (but nevertheless ready to chastise) eye of God, creating an idyllic image of the peasant community. This gathers in the stable in the evenings to tell stories, in the village fair to drink wine and play eating eggs, or in the fields to cooperate and work the land. The earth is a generous and caring mother. In the words of Anselmo, the old grandfather, it is 'warm because in winter it 'grew the skin' [...] to defend itself from the cold and avoid losing the warmth that is underneath' so it 'doesn't let its seeds die'²⁷. It provides the resources that he ingeniously uses to harvest fantastic tomatoes ('big and beautiful'²⁸) every year, anticipating the other peasant families.

On the other side, the city is a place of perdition and confrontation. With it, as has been noted, Olmi 'barges History into a film without history'²⁹. When the newly-married couple Stefano and Maddalena travel to Milan, the audience sees smoke rising from some village houses that are set ablaze by some battle between protesters and the army, and imagines gunshots and feels the panic in the streets of the metropolis. These images mirror the clashes between protesters and the Italian police mobile units (so-called *celerini*) that haunted Italian squares in the 1970s, with Paolo Pedrizzetti's iconographic photograph of Giuseppe Memeo taken precisely in 1977³⁰. Indeed, many responded to those who did not appreciate Olmi's method of depicted the reality of things – namely, the absence of struggles of the peasantry of northern Italy at the end of the 19th century – by noticing that: 'We have just finished speaking badly about red flags because they waved – too many or too much – in Bertolucci's *Novecento*³¹'.

Discussing the critique contained in *1900* of the Italian Communist Party (*Partito comunista italiano*, PCI) is useful to appreciate a subtle part of the intellectual climate of late 1970s Italy. The PCI was the red mammoth of the West, obtaining 34.4% of the Italian electorate in the 1976 general elections and almost 'risking' to join the Christian Democrats-led government³². The PCI supported it as an outsider and for a short spell in the so-called 'historic compromise' (*compromesso storico*), which

²⁷ E. Olmi (dir.), *L'albero degli zoccoli*, Rai, Italnoleggio Cinematografico 1978, 2h 1'.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 2h 51'.

²⁹ M. Morandini, *Ermanno Olmi*, Milan 2009, p. 61.

³⁰ C. Uva, *Images of Violence, Violence of Images: The "Years of Lead" and the Practice of Armed Struggle between Photography and Video*, in: *Stillness in Motion: Italy, Photography and the Meaning of Modernity*, ed. S.P. Hill, G. Minghelli, Toronto 2014, pp. 259–262.

³¹ B. Placido, *Ma i «villani» di Olmi vivono solo in Arcadia?*, in: *L'albero*, p. 98.

³² D. Priestland, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

obtained very little success concretely and which upset not a few militants³³. Film critic Leonard Quart labelled 1900 'Bertolucci's Marxist Opera', which is not inaccurate but requires specification³⁴. The movie contains a left-wing critique, or at least the appearances of it, of the official PCI position of those years, something which prompted a severe response to the film from the party³⁵. To appreciate this, we need to take one step back in time and to outline the evolution of Italian communism since the Second World War.

In 1944, with the Salerno Turn (*svolta di Salerno*), the then party leader Palmiro Togliatti abandoned the revolutionary path styled on the Bolshevik model of the October Revolution to realize socialism in Italy, understanding its impracticability in Western Europe at the time. In its place, Togliatti imposed a line of 'reform communism', which sought to develop a 'progressive democracy' (*democrazia progressiva*) along the lines of peace, democracy and economic development³⁶. Togliatti's political strategy encouraged cooperation between social classes, which was consequential to his historical analysis of fascism. Fascism had been able to insert itself and grow between the working classes (peasants and proletarians) and the middle strata (*ceti medi*) precisely as a reaction to the fear of a Bolshevik revolution after the First World War. Socialist radicalism had not only failed to bring about a socialist revolution. It had pushed the middle strata (doctors, teachers, intellectuals, shop-keepers, etc.) away from the working classes and to the side of latifundists (large landowners) and capitalist-monopolists (speculative and parasitic finance capital)³⁷. As Togliatti explained at the PCI Fifth Congress in December 1945 – January 1946, the 'defeat of the socialist movement [...] was essentially a great rupture between the organized socialist laborers with a collectivist attitude and the intermediate groups in the countryside and the city. This rupture [...] was at the origin of fascism'³⁸.

The new Italian polity was a constitutional Republic based on the alliance of anti-fascist forces, the most important of which grouped around the Christian Democrats, communists and socialists. Within this State,

³³ L. Canfora, *La metamorfosi*, Bari–Rome 2021, pp. 61–69.

³⁴ L. Quart, "1900" Bertolucci's Marxist Opera, "Cinéaste" 1978, 8, 3, pp. 24–27.

³⁵ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, pp. 260–262.

³⁶ G. Vacca, *Il comunismo italiano. Una cultura politica del Novecento*, Rome 2021; F. Barbagallo, *Il Pci, i ceti medi e la democrazia nel Mezzogiorno (1943–1947)*, "Studi Storici" 1985, 26, 3, pp. 523–544.

³⁷ G. Vacca, *La tragica modernità del fascismo. Le analisi di Antonio Gramsci, Palmiro Togliatti e Angelo Tasca*, Rome 2022.

³⁸ P. Togliatti, *Ceto medio ed Emilia Rossa*, in: Palmiro Togliatti. *La politica nel pensiero e nell'azione. Scritti e discorsi. 1917–1964*, eds. M. Ciliberto, G. Vacca, Milan 2014, p. 706.

these mass-parties acted as the political subjects for much of the remaining decades of the twentieth century, expressing hopes and struggles of the political life of the Italian nation³⁹. The PCI thus became the great repository of the culture of the State, and this was the case in the 1970s⁴⁰. This was especially true as fears of the return to a fascist regime and obscurantism grew with, for example, the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende in Chile and the following military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

Still, following 1968, criticism of the official PCI gradualist and evolutionary line of reforms towards socialism grew on the far-left, with discontent and impatience turning into armed clashes in the 1970s. On the intellectual front, figures like Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri formed new strands of progressive movements, the most famous of which is probably Workerism (*Operaismo*)⁴¹. Similarly, newspapers and journals, which were alternative to the PCI's loudspeaker *l'Unità*, were founded, for example, from 1969, *il manifesto*⁴². They represented a radical movement to criticize, among other issues, the machinery of the State which seemed to not move – 'jammed democracy' (*democrazia bloccata*), as it was called – of which the PCI was a clog, and of which we can maybe still synthesize the main problem with Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's classic phrase from *The Leopard*, 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change'⁴³.

In *Novecento*, then, the peasant communities are the cellulose manifestation of those who had liberated China from the Japanese imperialist grip first and, soon after, from the Guomindang nationalists; those who were now, from the late 1960s, 'making the Revolution', the Cultural Revolution – think of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo: China* (1972). These peasants, we are told in *1900*, believed in 'no marriage' and 'free love' and historical echoes tell us that they were Maoists like those who proclaimed cult-like loyalty to the three Ms of Mao, Marx and Marcuse from 1968 and into the 1970s⁴⁴. The peasant collective of *Novecento* chants and opposes the repressive force of the bureaucratic State. In a notorious

³⁹ G. Vacca, *L'Italia contesa. Comunisti e democristiani nel lungo dopoguerra (1943–1978)*, Venice 2018.

⁴⁰ L. Sciascia, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴¹ M. Mandarinini, *Introduction to A. Negri, Time for Revolution*, London–New York 2013, pp. 1–18.

⁴² G. Moltedo, *Il Manifesto: Italy's Left-Wing Media*, "The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics" 2000, 5, 2, pp. 122–125.

⁴³ G. di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, transl. A. Colquhoun, London 1960, p. 31.

⁴⁴ M. Tesini, L. Zambenardi, *Introduzione: metamorfosi di un mito*, in: *Quel che resta di Mao: Apogeo e rimozione di un mito occidentale*, eds. M. Tesini, L. Zambenardi, Milan 2018, pp. 1–13; B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 2nd 2h 07'.

scene, the camera shifts horizontally to show the opposing, nay, the enemy sides – Togliatti had been cautious about the term ‘enemies’, opting instead for the term ‘adversaries’ in his famous lectures⁴⁵ – during the St Martin’s Day, when peasants are being evicted by mounted soldiers. On one side, peasants stand their ground. Women sit and then lay down on the road, which becomes a front line. They use the power of singing to repel the enemy soldiers. This reminds one of the sit-ins that had taken place in the 1960s and 1970s against the invasion of Vietnam. On the other side, mounted soldiers ride in to expropriate and arrest peasants. One of the landlords incites them to charge these civilians: ‘you show them, lads, that property is untouchable. Property is inviolable!’⁴⁶. Indeed, this is a modelled scene of the clashes between police and demonstrators in 1970s Italy, and 1900 mirrors Italian contingent politics as much as Edoarda Masi’s *Breve storia della Cina contemporanea* (short history of contemporary China) (1979)⁴⁷.

In addition to containing criticism to the PCI political strategy, *Novecento* also implies disagreement with the PCI analysis of the peasant question. Togliatti, reading Gramsci, conjugated the peasant question in Italy as the synthesis of the ‘Southern Question’ and the ‘Vatican Question’. His position on the validity of the ‘religious phenomenon’ and on believers had changed, and the pacifist and more open character that the Catholic Church had come to embrace with the Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965 modified its function in the age of atomic weapons⁴⁸. The PCI had thus long worked to pursue an alliance with the Roman Church, rather than an anti-religious struggle. As Giuseppe Vacca has remarked, ‘collaboration between the communist, socialist and Catholic masses was the basis of the struggles to implement the Constitution’⁴⁹.

However, this rapprochement between PCI and Church was precisely questioned during the 1970s. The Gramsci-Togliatti paradigm was displaced, or at least challenged, in favor of anti-religious sentiments that had long existed in Italian radical thinking. Staunch fringes did not accept the traditional anti-fascist paradigm for a democratic State, recalling somewhat selectively some fiery passages from Lenin’s *State and Revolution* about smashing the State⁵⁰. In *Novecento*, the assault on the Church

⁴⁵ P. Togliatti, *Lezioni sul fascismo*, Rome 2019.

⁴⁶ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 1st 1h 52’.

⁴⁷ E. Masi, *Breve storia della Cina contemporanea*, Rome–Bari 1979.

⁴⁸ G. Vacca, *Il comunismo*, pp. 149–154.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁵⁰ On the different attitudes towards the State between Marxists in the West and the East see, D. Losurdo, *Il marxismo occidentale. Come nacque, come morì, come può rinascere*, Bari–Rome

is evident. Olmo's explicit blasphemy ('*porco Dio!*') was unprecedented at the time and represents only the initial skirmish of a dichotomic conflict which unfolds in the subsequent developments⁵¹. In the scene about the St Martin's Day confrontation, one of the peasants shouts that 'not even the Pope, not even Jesus Christ can send me away from here, because I have been living here for forty years'⁵². The Lord's authority on earth and divine power are not enough to defeat the man's attachment to his forty-year history. Later, when the 'bosses' (*padroni*) enlist fascists for protection against the laborers' union actions (Bertolucci's reading of the origin of fascism glosses over the middle classes), the parish priest gives the bowl to collect believers' offers to Attila Melanchini (the local fascist thug) to collect the bosses' money⁵³. It is the consecration of an alliance, which is what priests accomplish during Mass through the sanctification of the host. But in 1900 it is not the union of the body and blood of Christ; instead, it translates into one of landowners and fascists and is consecrated by the Church. 'Beyle believed that a Republic of good Christians could not survive. Montesquieu amended: "A Republic of good Christians cannot exist". But a Republic of good Italian Roman Catholics can exist and survive. Thus'⁵⁴.

As we mentioned above, the 1970s were also a liminal passage with regards to the issue of the family, on which the Catholic Church was obviously highly involved. The divorce law was passed in 1970, the abortion law in 1978. The issues continued to arouse Italian public opinion and to be widely debated. Christian Democrats conservatives allied with (neo-)fascists of the Italian Social Movement (*Movimento sociale italiano*) (the ideological heir of which, i.e. *Fratelli d'Italia*, currently runs the country⁵⁵) to repeal the laws through two referendums, in 1974 and 1981 respectively. Political stances were highly polarized. For example, *l'Unità* of 28 April 1974 accused the 'crusaders of the abrogative referendum' (on divorce) of representing the 'real convergence of the fascists and the Christian Democratic leadership'⁵⁶.

Olmi's film fitted into that debate and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* reflected doubts and fears of the time. Stefano and Maddalena, the newly-married couple, receive a baby from the nuns' monastery. Batisti's

2017.

⁵¹ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 1st 28'.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 1st 1h 45'.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 1st 1h 57'.

⁵⁴ L. Sciascia, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵⁵ L. Canfora, *Il fascismo non è mai morto*, Bari 2024.

⁵⁶ *Dicono menzogne a catena perché la verità è contro di loro*, "l'Unità" 28 April 1974, p 7.

wife delivers her third (or fourth?) child to this world, with no help from the midwife. 'Children come into the world on their own, without any help' is her response to the husband's concerns about delivery safety⁵⁷. Interestingly, there is plenty of progeny in this film, but no intercourse: the countryside is chaste. Indeed, religion plays a major role in the movement of the film, as we will see in more detail later. The widow Runk makes the right choice when she goes to church to collect holy water to cure her sick cow: the beast recovers the following day. Folk beliefs opposes the veterinarian, who is a symbol of the veterinarian, a symbol of modern technology and scientific society. He is proven wrong as he had advised to put down the animal and sell the meat off to obtain at least some dearly-needed money⁵⁸. Nobody fails to see the parallel between the occurrences in the community of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* and modern clinics that began to help women perform abortions in 1970s Italy.

PART TWO. PEASANTS AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MODERNITY

We have established some historical coordinates to hark the two peasant films under scrutiny in this essay back to their intellectual map. We can now advance our reflections on these peasant films one step further. In this second section we intend to show that the image of peasants offered by Olmi and Bertolucci becomes a tool to confront the advent of the latest form of modernization in Italy, which was being completed in the 1970s with intense liminal spasms for Italian society. However, or perhaps precisely because of this, peasants do not belong to modernity in the two films. As Guerra has argued, these films managed to encapsulate and express the tension between 'memory and rebellion' that surrounded the bucolic world of 1970s Italy⁵⁹. Defining modernity falls outside of the boundaries of this essay. Still, we can say what modernity is not in our movies: peasants. To put it another way, if modernity means movement, peasants mean stasis. Looking at the issue from three angles (machinery, landscape and historical movement) illustrates the case.

Let us first confront the issue of modernity in relation to the image of peasants from the point of view of machinery. Piero Bevilacqua, the leading scholar of agrarian studies in Italy, has explained that a 'process of modernization' undisputably took place in the Italian countryside

⁵⁷ E. Olmi, *op. cit.*, 1h 43'.

⁵⁸ M. Gladych, *Review of L'alberto degli zoccoli by Ermanno Olmi, "Film Quarterly"* 1980-1981, 34, 2, p. 58.

⁵⁹ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

between the 1950s and 1970s, leading to the mechanization of agriculture⁶⁰. This translates in our two films in the fact that the peasant image is alternately an instrument of criticism or rejection of this mechanized modernity. But it is never part of its construction, as, for example, it was for socialist works like Liu Qing's *Builders* (or *Builders of a New Life*, *Chuangye Shi*, 1959), whereby peasants embraced the most modern techniques of production to construct a society projected to the future, or even like Renato Guttuso's *Occupazione delle terre incolte in Sicilia, 1949–50* (occupation of uncultivated lands in Sicily, 1949–1950) (1949)⁶¹. 1900 criticizes modernity, although it takes note of it.

For Bertolucci, the form of modernity which was sweeping over Italian countryside was wrong because it was capitalist. The peasant image, by contrast, becomes the instrument to face capitalist modernity. Modernity, then, overwhelms peasants through the advent of machines. In one scene gravid with meaning, Leo Dalcò (Olmo's wise grandfather, the patriarch of the Dalcò family and the head of the farm laborers) peers the horizon as the new master Giovanni Berlinghieri, Alfredo senior's second son, drives his new dump rake in ecstasy. Significantly, Leo whispers 'I'm not riding that devil'⁶². Leo gazes at the horizon where the sun is setting. This does not signify the end of the day and the past, but the future. In it, Leo will no longer exist. He is lost and powerless as the line of modernity approaches. He is static and immobile just as the peasantry is perceived to be passive – or 'feet-dragging', as Eric Hobsbawm provocatively called it in 1973 in the first issue of *The Journal of Peasant Studies*⁶³ – against the progress of history. The sun is setting Leo's own end.

The connotation of machines is equally negative in both tranches of the film, with a heavy linkage to fascism. When Olmo returns from the war, the modern machinery has put laborers out of work. Attila Melanchini, the somewhat ridiculous caricature of a fascist disguised as a sadomasochist psychopath, introduces them⁶⁴. His words are unequivocal and create an immediate antagonism between the audience and the machines. They are conflated with fascism (and set against the peasants): 'the master had to rent modern machines [...] These are machines that

⁶⁰ P. Bevilacqua, *Conclusioni*, in: *Riforma fondiaria e Paesaggio. A sessant'anni dalle Leggi di Riforma: dibattito politico-sociale e linee di sviluppo*, ed. G. Bonini, Soveria Mannelli 2012, p. 231.

⁶¹ L. Pucci, *History, Myth and the Everyday: Luchino Visconti, Renato Guttuso, and the Fishing Communities of the Italian South*, "Oxford Art Journal" 2013, 36, 3, p. 428.

⁶² B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 1st 25'.

⁶³ E. Hobsbawm, *Peasants and Politics*, "The Journal of Peasant Studies" 1973, 1, 1, p. 18.

⁶⁴ L. Quart, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

make life easier [...] it's change, but it's progress. Look, what a sight!"⁶⁵. Machines make life easy for the wealthy and the fascists, despicable and impossible for peasants.

Finally, towards the end of the film, we see new tractors. This time Attila drives one. He exclaims with scorn: 'Learn, you villagers! Do you know what this is? It is the fascist miracle! The miracle is to transform draught horses into steam horses. And with this technology we will win the war!'⁶⁶. What is natural is replaced by what is artificial, and modernity becomes a bulldozer which signifies 'brute force and violent coercion'⁶⁷. Olmo, who is standing close to a horse, whispers to the equine, 'you heard that one, you are no longer needed'⁶⁸. The angle from which the shot is taken shows Olmo and the horses on the left side of the screen while Attila and the machines stand on the right, placing in neat opposition these enemies, just like in the scene with Leo and Giovanni. Significantly, in this instance peasants gain some agency, however temporarily, as they rebel against this modernity: throwing (sanctified) dung at these modernizers, they fight against the replacement of peasants and beasts by machines. Morricone's triumphalist tune, which opened the film and inspired struggle, strengthens the growing intensity of this catharsis. The repetition of vulgar terms such as 'shit', 'shitting' 'masks of shit' (*merda, cagare, maschere di merda*), is evocative of Pier Pasolini Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and his own critique of 'modernizing capitalism'⁶⁹.

Not dissimilarly from Bertolucci, Olmi, too, rejects the modernity of machinery. However, differently from Bertolucci, he uses the peasant image to offer an alternative vision of a culture or civilization which ought to be conserved and even pursued. As Marco D'Eramo has explained, the 'conservative turn' that occurred at some point in the Western world between the 1970s and early 1980s, had a double connotation that was political (exemplified by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan) and 'preservationist' (the UK National Heritage Act was passed in 1981)⁷⁰. Through *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, we see modernity itself as an error,

⁶⁵ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 1st 1h 39'.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 2nd 1h 40'.

⁶⁷ R. Harrington, *Landscape with bulldozer: machines, modernity and environment in post-war Britain*, in: *Histories of Technology, the Environment and Modern Britain*, eds. J. Agar, J. Ward, London 2018, p. 43.

⁶⁸ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 2nd 1h 40'.

⁶⁹ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 2nd 1h 47'; see also: S. Rohdie, *Salò: A Cinema of Poetry*, "Criterion" 4.10.2011, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/512-salo-a-cinema-of-poetry> [access: 16.07.2024].

⁷⁰ M. D'Eramo, *Il selfie del mondo. Indagine sull'età del turismo*, Milan 2017, pp. 90–101.

with the peasantry becoming a tree to shield us from its dazzling rays. As Olmi revealed in an interview,

'after Cannes and the success of the film [...] the peasant world felt [...] recognised. Before then, some people thought that the peasant world was not worth to be considered a culture. I had the feeling that even in that intellectual world – especially that of academic extraction – which kept itself at distance from the peasant world, many levees were broken. Many minds understood that the peasant world was the repository of a millenary culture that should be considered with great attention, especially at a time when the global reality of the planet was changing. And today, at a particular time in which our very lives... are at risk, that peasant wisdom, not only in cultivating the land, but also in acting in a relationship of respect towards mother earth, that attention, that culture in its own right, today we should not only reconsider it, but retrace it. So, let us look back at the land, trying to rediscover traits of a parent [*genitrice*] that has protected us and will continue to protect us'⁷¹.

Peasants carry on their shoulders the full weight of confronting a cumbersome and automated modernity. How can they accomplish that? By suffocating the narrative with human labor, excluding the use of machines. The peasants depicted in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* do not use any modern machinery. They work the land by the sweat of their brows, just like what the labor mystic A. D. Gordon wanted of his socialist Zionist *chalutzim* (pioneers) in Palestine⁷². Anselmo's hands take the central stage as he plants tomatoes seedlings. Old wisdom, or the wisdom of the elders, is disarming in the face of modern, scientific knowledge⁷³. Italian futurists believed that the union of machine and human body would create something superior, and the 'process of eroticization and spiritualization of the machine' repudiated 'femininity, affection, and bodily gravity'⁷⁴. Here, instead, Anselmo's finger penetrates the soil to plant the seeds, precisely displaying a loving intercourse which confirms the 'principle of maximum visibility' of the sexual act in porn⁷⁵.

⁷¹ *L'albero degli zoccoli Intervista a Ermanno Olmi*, YouTube channel "Margherito Campofiorito" [access: 16.8.2018], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMOg-cTceqQ&ab_channel=MargheritoCampofiorito [access: 17.07.2024], 10'.

⁷² M. Giuliani, *La filosofia ebraica*, Brescia 2017, pp. 132–133.

⁷³ M. Gladych, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁷⁴ A. Toscano, *The Promethean Gap: Modernism, Machines, and the Obsolescence of Man*, "Modernism / modernity" 2016, 23, 3, p. 594.

⁷⁵ R. Dyer, *Idol thoughts: orgasm and self-reflexivity in gay pornography*, "Critical Quarterly" 1994, 36, 1, pp. 52–53.

In turn, the peasant image offered by Olmi serves to expel modernity to some external world, or at least to corner it in some black-box, which we glimpse at distance and perceive with distrust. In *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, the landlord makes us see 'the modern' through the window of his villa as his son plays the piano or, again, lets us hear it when the gramophone plays while peasants on wooden carts sell their harvest to the landlord. In this sense, the function of peasant imagery is not unlike that of G. W. Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), which was published when Britain was going through a similar liminal period – with heavy urbanization, mechanization, etc. – after the Second World War. Hoskins was 'turning away from the present' by reacting against it and looking at the past, and he despised urban theorists who in his mind had scarred England⁷⁶. To him, landscape was a document losing its meaning with modernity⁷⁷. The same underlying assumptions characterize Olmi's work.

That the images of peasants serve to confront a process of modernization in 1970s Italy is further confirmed when we look at their relation to the landscape, which offers us the second angle to scrutinize our films. Accompanied by the deployment of heavy-machinery, radical transformations of the Italian landscape (both rural and urban) took place in the decades after the Second World War. Substantial migration 'spectrified' the countryside, just like in post-1978 China, as peasants moved to the city to become industrial proletarians⁷⁸. Some even wrote of the 'death of the peasant universe' by the 1980s, which was

'born from the destruction of ancient systems of cultivation, from machines that erase stables and oxen, from machines that eliminate much of the work of men in the fields or facilitate it by making it more like the automatism of factory workers; it is born from the flight of peasants' children to the cities. Thus is the peasant world transformed into a myth, a place of freedom, of a lost *epos*'⁷⁹.

⁷⁶ D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, London 1998, p. 276; see also: D. Matless, *One Man's England: W. G. Hoskins and the English Culture of Landscape*, "Rural History" 1993, 4, 2, pp. 187–207.

⁷⁷ D. Matless, *Landscape*, p. 274

⁷⁸ P. Bevilacqua, *op. cit.*, pp. 230–231; on the process of spectrification in China see: H. Yan, *Spectralization of the rural: Reinterpreting the labor mobility of rural young women in post-Mao China*, "American Ethnologist" 2003, 30, 4, pp. 586–587.

⁷⁹ G. Bianchino, *Le campagne del realismo*, in: *Paesaggi in trasformazione. Teorie e pratiche della ricerca a cinquant'anni dalla Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano di Emilio Sereni*, eds. G. Bonini, C. Visentin, Gattatico e Bologna 2014, p. 118.

The Tree of Wooden Clogs engages more directly with the issue of the landscape than *Novecento*, which focuses on the history of the people rather than paying attention to their relation with non-anthropocentric elements. The former is a study of man within the landscape, with strong naturalistic undertones, the latter is a history of social struggle. It is therefore useful to concentrate on Olmi's movie. In it, human labor can destroy a landscape which is purportedly 'exaggeratedly beautiful'⁸⁰. Negative repercussions are clear since too much human activity on the land becomes punishable. So, peasants are glorified when they work the land to the extent to which they are allowed, either singularly or collectively; so long as they remain children of the earth.

However, peasants are punished when their labor is too invasive. They can exist in the landscape, but they are not allowed to modify it. They are 'literally part of the landscape', as one critic put it⁸¹. And it must be unchanging. The limits of modernity transform nature to a greater extent than it is acceptable, and punishment follows suit. This is an interesting change from earlier visions of peasants and labor. Giuseppe De Santis, for instance, had argued in 1941 that 'Landscape would be insignificant without the presence of man', illustrating the point through his 1947 *Caccia tragica* (tragic hunt) or 1949 *Riso amaro* (bitter rice)⁸². Emilio Sereni's *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano (History of the Italian Agricultural Landscape)* (1961) made a similar point. Concrete actions were taken in this sense and, for example, the *Ente Fucino* (Fucino institute) was the statal organization established in 1954 to manage the transformations of that territory⁸³. In contrast to all of this, in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, Batistì is expelled from the farmhouse after the landowner discovers that he chopped down a tree. The reason behind it – to give his son a new clog – is irrelevant. That is, as soon as Batistì modifies the image of a pristine and pre-determined landscape, he is punished. This evokes the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Of course, cutting the tree is an act of disobedience to the master and a sign of disregard of private property, thus calling for divine punishment. God, not just a man

⁸⁰ S. Giacomoni, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁸¹ D. Young, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs: The Sacredness of Life as Understatement*, "Criterion", 11.2.2017, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4425-the-tree-of-wooden-clogs-the-sacredness-of-life-as-understatement> [access: 25.04.2024].

⁸² L. Pucci, "Terra Italia": *The Peasant Subject as Site of National and Socialist Identities in the Work of Renato Guttuso and Giuseppe De Santis*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes" 2008, 71, 1, p. 321.

⁸³ C. Felice, *Una storia esemplare. Fucino: bonifica, riforma agraria, distretto agroindustriale*, Rome 2023, p. 120.

(the landlord), intervenes to castigate it. 'This is a very harsh punishment' says Anselmo, warning us⁸⁴.

God punishes Batisti but saves the widow Runk and her cow, displaying Grace. Will, which in this case is the choice of the widow to pray to the Lord, is preserved. The fact is paradoxical in a world that is full of injustices and in which God intervenes only when private property is challenged; just like in the Superman comics, as Umberto Eco pointed out long ago⁸⁵. So, here, justice is God rather than Superman. Furthermore, Batisti attacks nature with an axe, rather than nurturing it with shovels, ploughs and hoes. In the film, nature is sacralized and placed in a dichotomous relationship with the urbanizing modernity. Therefore, whoever transforms it with violence and speed *à la* Bolshevik Revolution must be punished, so that its preservation may continue.

To the third and last angle. This allows us to discuss the peasant image in relation to the problem of historical movement which generates modernity. What, if any, capacity do peasants have to resolve the narrative of the film? What is their (dis)ability to confront modernity? And what brings about, or fails to deliver, a qualitative change from the present situation in the films? It is easy to see that in our two movies peasants lack the functional agency to unlock the progress of the narrative, thus bringing about modernity. We have partly already seen this with regards to *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. Olmi's grand explicatory power rests on the Christian deity. In turn, peasants are static and incapable of bringing about any modernity. The film, Olmi explained, 'marks the official end of the peasant world, the date of its death'⁸⁶.

'In some scenes of *Novecento*', Bertolucci 'sense[d] the emotion of the peasant world that is writing History'⁸⁷. Still, not dissimilarly from Olmi's work, peasants are the carriers of a defeated modernity. They capture Attila and Regina, who are subsequently brought to the cemetery for execution. Attila reads the epigraphs on the tombstones of those he had killed: 'the cruel hand of fate', 'fierce times'⁸⁸. Admitting to have been the culprit, he is an obstacle, the removal of which resolves the problem of historical memory in Italy as all evils are attributed to fascism. He holds, and is, the explicatory key for Italian history. That the peasants eliminate

⁸⁴ E. Olmi, *op. cit.*, 2h 46'.

⁸⁵ U. Eco, *The Myth of Superman*, review of *The Amazing Adventures of Superman*, trans. Natalie Chilton, "Diacritics" 1972, 2, 1, p. 22.

⁸⁶ Ermanno Olmi cited in M. Morandini, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁸⁷ Bernardo Bertolucci cited in S. Socci, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, Milan 2008, p. 23.

⁸⁸ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 2nd 2h 4'.

him signifies unlocking the path to modernity: the narrative resumes⁸⁹. Olmo re-enters the story exactly after Attila is shot dead. He and Alfredo go on, or return, to be friends-foes as they were before the advent of Mussolini's regime.

However, the peasants can only bring about an incomplete, truncated or defeated modernity. Bertolucci's diplopia with regards to time (Marxist or Proustian) has already been noted⁹⁰, and here we shall focus on the fact that peasants do not have the functional capacity to bring about concrete progress as they only resolve one problem which immediately opens up another one. This is not some form of dialectical movement of society but, instead, implies that peasants can only produce a still-born modern world, which immediately dies. Their modernity is too weak, lacking any strength to survive even just a few minutes. This mirrors the 1970s discontent with what happened at the end of the war, i.e. the communist revolution did not materialize. 'Youths have more cognizance (*cognizione*) than the elderly' says a woman while a teenager partisan, Leonida, escorts Alfredo into the court to be tried⁹¹. Everyone had forgotten about him, focusing instead only on the fascists (Attila and Regina). They were not the real problem: the master is. And *padrone* is a word that we hear over and over. Echoing the BR sham trials, Olmo declares opened the 'people's trial against Alfredo Berlinghieri, master and therefore enemy of the people'⁹².

The trial ought to end the master, not the man. Now Alfredo exists only as a person, at least for a few minutes. For Bertolucci, revolution was betrayed – he failed to read the implication that it was not potent enough to resist betrayal. Soon, partisans of the National Liberation Committee (*Comitato di liberazione nazionale*, CLN) take away the peasants' weapons. Everyone leaves, except for Olmo, Alfredo and Leonida. The youth cries, not only because they took away his rifle, but also, and especially, because the master was not rid of. Alfredo gets up and proclaims that 'the master is alive'⁹³. The CLN politicians – including Christian democrats, communists and socialists – have saved the master by disarming the revolutionary peasantry. In fact, they have actually brought the *padrone* back to life, after he had been destroyed by the force of the popular trial. Because the result (the Italian State) is a monstrous machine and not an attractive libertine figure, the CLN represents doctor Frankenstein instead of *Poor*

⁸⁹ L. Pucci, "Terra Italia", p. 320.

⁹⁰ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, pp. 256–258.

⁹¹ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 2nd 2h 10'.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 2nd 2h 12'.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 2nd 2h 26'.

Things' surgeon Godwin Baxter. Significantly, a peasant woman questions Olmo's wisdom that keeping Alfredo alive works better than killing him insofar as it produces a living proof of the end of his mastery: 'you have learnt well to speak. But I don't understand your words. Behind them, there lies an imbroglio'⁹⁴. This is the accusation levelled at the entire establishment in the 1970s – *facta non verba* – and these peasants' modernity is defeated.

In one particularly meaningful scene, Olmo looks straight into the camera – the message is directed to the audience:

'Yes, that's right comrades. Fascists are not like mushrooms that spring up overnight. no. Bosses sowed fascists. They wanted them, they paid them. And with the fascists, the bosses made more and more money, to the point that they didn't even know where to put that money. They sent us to Africa, to Russia, to Greece, to Albania, to Spain. But those who pay is always us. Who pays? The proletariat, the workers, the peasants, the poor!'⁹⁵

In the passage, one can almost see a schizophrenic split or a bipolar disorder in Olmo's mind. The message to the audience is clear: the fascists were created by the bosses; the bosses are even more guilty than the fascists. They are the cause of that evil. Yet, it is Olmo who, shortly after having uttered these words, instructs the peasants to give up their weapons under CLN orders. On the one hand, then, Olmo speaks (Bertolucci's) truth, recognizing that the bosses are the root-cause of the problem. On the other hand, he convinces the remaining peasants to not resolve the issue. He says that the masters are the problem but accepts and promotes the conditions for their durability and existence. It may be this contradiction that pushes him to go on jostling with Alfredo until the end. The failure of the peasants to carry out the modernization of the country reopens the game of the Italian historical problem: fascism is over, yet fascism and the causes that created it still thrive.

PART THREE. SOME ELEMENTS FOR A PEASANT SCHEMATA

We have located the main historical coordinates to situate the two films under considerations in this article, exploring the 1970s as a liminal period characterized by instability and tension that reflected on the screen.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, 2nd 2h 19'.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, 2nd, 2h 17'.

We have also demonstrated that the peasant image that these films constructed was wielded to confront the gnawing feeling of an encroaching modernization, though peasants were incapable of producing a durable and alternative form of modernity. We now advance our enquiry by focusing on specific tropes about peasants that are at work in *Novecento* and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. Exposing some elements of what we call a 'peasant *schemata*' confirms the status of liminality of the 1970s for the production of peasant images in films, allowing us to approach them more critically and thus eschewing simplistic characterizations and illusory views. This raises the issue of what authenticity these two films intended to conserve⁹⁶, consolidating the point that they are conservative attempts to confront modernity.

At the time of their release, harsh, if not polemical, criticism was levelled against the two films. They were accused of distorting the history of peasants and even of Italy⁹⁷. Here we are not interested in repeating or reprising those attacks, especially the most contentious ones. Rather, tip-toing around their edge, we intend to focus on certain aspects which are common or similar in forming the peasants' image in these films. This is useful insofar as the image has often been regarded as historically accurate. This is misleading, at least in part and especially when it is done in a way that indicates a degree of unconsciousness⁹⁸. By marking it, we move forward the limits of our present appreciation of the peasants' image in films.

Novecento and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* imply, though not equally directly, similar claims of historical authenticity. Perhaps even more importantly, these claims are accepted as valid by portions of the audiences and critics alike. This is problematic insofar as we are lured to believe, or accept altogether, a distorted image to be a truthful representation of reality. There is no problem in the author being a more-or-less serendipitous creator – indeed, this is one of the aspects of being an artist. But issues arise when a work contains claims about historical accuracy and authenticity because the artistic construction risks being taken to be an accurate picture of history. This process works in a way which is similar to what art historian E. H. Gombrich pointed out in his masterpiece *Art and Illusion*

⁹⁶ M. D'Eramo, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–108.

⁹⁷ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, pp. 255–269.

⁹⁸ While we agree with Brass that films can be instruments for the popularization of certain messages, we feel that his arguments at times fall into schematic determinism and facile conclusions about ideology, mechanically seeing pieces of art as brainwashing tools which are ready-made and all-effective. See: T. Brass, *Reel*, p. 6.

(1960)⁹⁹. While it is undeniable that our two films contain portions of, allow us say, ‘historical representativity’ (what would count as historical truth implies questions about the philosophy of history, as much as truth, objectivity, reality and other concepts which we cannot tackle in this essay¹⁰⁰), to point out certain issues with our films helps us to approach them more critically than many viewers have done so far. Let us see some examples of how these claims are constructed and how they work.

Olmi’s reel tends toward the historical-documentary film, which implies by no means diminishing the caliber of the work, let alone that of the director, as some believe¹⁰¹. Certainly, there are elements in both the film and its reception to confirm our point. An annotation in the opening scenes of Olmi’s work, for instance, tells us that the film is ‘Interpreted by peasants and people of the Bergamo countryside’¹⁰². Shortly after, we read that ‘This is what the Lombardy farmhouse must have looked like at the end of the last century’¹⁰³. Similarly, *1900* displays in the opening and closing of the film the following message: ‘We would like to thank all the Emilian peasants who brought their irreplaceable contribution to the making of this film with their faces, experience, enthusiasm, songs and culture’¹⁰⁴. These words create an idea of accuracy in the audience and perpetrate a claim of historical authenticity. Yet, one may already intuitively guess the paradoxical connotation that points toward the artifice of the movie construction: we are told that peasants’ contribution was ‘irreplaceable’ (*insostituibile*) when, in actual facts, the central peasants in *1900* (Olmo, his girlfriend Anita Foschi or Leo) are precisely replaced by famous actors (Gérard Depardieu, Stefania Sandrelli, Sterling Hayden).

Still, portions of the general audience and even critics deem the two films accurate depiction of reality. Recently, it has been claimed that Olmi delivered ‘a document on the peasant civilization that is destined to endure and to be a textbook, in the absence of other sources’¹⁰⁵. One commentator called *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* a ‘documentary glimpse into a long-gone way of life’¹⁰⁶. One fan remarked on YouTube that ‘My life was

⁹⁹ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton and Oxford 2000, pp. 63–90.

¹⁰⁰ For a synthetic, yet compelling, discussion on these issues see: A. Horton, *op. cit.*

¹⁰¹ Gian Piero Brunetta cited in M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

¹⁰² E. Olmi, *op. cit.*, 4’.

¹⁰³ *Idem.*

¹⁰⁴ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 1st 3’ and 2nd 2h 34’.

¹⁰⁵ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

¹⁰⁶ D. Young, *op. cit.*

just like that! And I thank those times!’¹⁰⁷. Another significant YouTube comment betrays the efficacy that these films enjoy in claiming authenticity while producing distorted images: ‘we were like those in the film, whether we like it or not. And we should not forget where we came from’ because ‘Memories are fundamental both individually and collectively’¹⁰⁸. There is more. A Letterboxd comment reads that *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* ‘does not in any way portray an idealized version of this sort of [rural] lifestyle. [...] [I]t intrinsically presents the viewer with sounds and images so deeply rooted in reality that you actually begin to get lost in this world entirely’¹⁰⁹. This is true of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* more so than *Novecento*, which is obvious enough since Olmi’s attempts often crossed the boundary between fiction and documentary¹¹⁰. Nevertheless, *1900*, too, enjoys a fair deal of recognition in terms of historical authenticity, and a *New York Times* reviewer called it a ‘five-hour crash course in Italian history’¹¹¹. This view has convinced parts of the audience, with one popular Letterboxd reviewer arguing that the film represents ‘History lessons [...] for the masses!’¹¹².

This pledge to authenticity is problematic to the extent that peasant imagery is built on pre-conceived *schemata*. On it, our authors base their characters, adjusting the details. To attempt an organic analysis of the peasant *schemata* in its entirety trespasses the scope of this article, and here we limit our scrutiny to two significant elements. They confirm that the 1970s were a period of liminality, what Guerra has defined the ‘peasant myth’ period¹¹³, which affected the production of the im-

¹⁰⁷ Comment by “@pepaivanova9000”, 17.12.2022, YouTube video *L'albero degli Zoccoli* (1978), YouTube channel “WMStudio Entertainment”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jn3n5814f5c&ab_channel=WMStudioEntertainment [access: 15.03.2023, removed as of 17.07.2024].

¹⁰⁸ Comment by “Mirko Locatelli”, date unspecified, in D. Colombo, «*L'albero degli zoccoli*» e la civiltà contadina, “*L'eco di Bergamo*”, 16.10.2017, https://www.ecodibergamo.it/stories/luoghi-non-comuni/lalbero-degli-zoccolie-la-civiltà-contadina_1258090_11/ [access: 16.07.2024].

¹⁰⁹ Comment by “Jerry McGlothlin”, 28.3.2022, *Letterboxd*, <https://letterboxd.com/film/the-tree-of-wooden-clogs/reviews/by/activity/> [access: 15.07.2024].

¹¹⁰ R. Blumenberg, *Documentary Films and the Problem of “Truth”*, “*Journal of the University Film Association*” 1977, 29, 4, pp. 19–22.

¹¹¹ A.O. Scott, *A Five-Hour Crash Course in Italian History That’s Also Great Filmmaking*, “*New York Times*”, 6.5.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/movies/1900-movie.html> [access: 16.07.2024].

¹¹² Comment by “Neil Bahadur”, 1.4.2018, *Letterboxd*, <https://letterboxd.com/film/1900/reviews/by/activity/> [access: 15.07.2024].

¹¹³ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

age of peasants in Italy. The first element concerns the contraposition between ‘noble peasant’ and ‘bad peasant’, which in turn signify productive and speculative capital. The visual bricolage that makes up the noble peasant stereotype in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* has already been studied elsewhere¹¹⁴, and suffice it to say that it works for *1900* too. Olmo is a stallion-like male, always engaged in some form of productive activity (from work to sex). Rather than focusing on this, here we privilege the political economic side of things.

In *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, Batistì is the noble peasant. He is set in opposition to the bad peasant Finardi. Batistì is defined both positively (with his characteristics) and negatively (as opposed to the bad peasant). Finardi, then, represents the ‘shadow side’ of the peasant world (e.g. narrowness, greed, violence), although one that has benevolent cadence¹¹⁵. In terms of political economy analysis, the formula used in these films is the same to that of Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987). That is, there is opposition between good or productive capital and financial or parasitical capital¹¹⁶. It is so with our peasants. Batistì is honest, hard-working, productive, just like the redeemed Bud Fox or his father Carl. Finardi is speculative and unproductive, essentially representing finance. He steals the golden coin, i.e. earns without laboring and without producing anything. When Finardi loses it, this bad peasant goes crazy, equally to Gordon Gekko who maddens when taking losses or missing profit. There is a difference, which made *Wall Street* the classic it is and one of the seven trumpets of neo-liberalism. ‘Greed is good’ is Gekko’s slogan. It cannot be for any of Olmi’s characters because they are still enshrined by religious morality. The solution of these two films is also similar. In one, Gekko ends up in jail. In *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, Finardi is put to bed with high fever, and a fortune teller (*donna del segno*) is called to cure the sinner, perhaps redeeming him¹¹⁷.

In *1900*, the same *schemata* is at work. It has been observed that what Bertolucci accomplished

with his imagistic outpouring, is to create a sentimentalized, populist mythology – one where only the wealthy are given to vicious bickering and avarice, and the peasants, despite their poverty,

¹¹⁴ Allow me to refer to, A. Bonfanti, “Dalle Stalle alle Stelle”: Peasant Stereotypes, Pledges to Authenticity and Spaces of Liminality in *Return to Dust and The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, “New Formations” 2024, 113, pp. 89–109.

¹¹⁵ M. Morandini, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–62.

¹¹⁶ J. Kinkle, A. Toscano, *Filming the Crisis: A Survey*, “Film Quarterly” 2011, 65, 1, pp. 44–45.

¹¹⁷ E. Olmi, *op. cit.*, 2h 3’.

lead rich, radiant lives. Nor are all the wealthy equally guilty; the old patriarch, who lives close to the land and to his peasants, is largely absolved of class blame. The full onus is placed on his flaccid, self-pitying, hypocritical son, Giovanni (Romolo Valli), who introduces machines to the land, and destroys the unspoken bond (*noblesse oblige*) that existed between masters and peasants¹¹⁸.

The point is not inaccurate, though incomplete, and the tension between productive and speculative capital thus remains underexplored. We see this in the film, dividing different generations of landlords. Alfredo senior, father of Giovanni and grandfather to Alfredo junior, grows old to despise his son who has introduced modern machines and distanced himself from the land and from actual production. Alfredo senior rants scathingly towards the new generation: 'family of vultures [...] there's an ocean between us. He [Giovanni] talks and talks, he buys machines. But in the meantime, everything goes down the drain. You'll slice your ass with that mower, Mr Modernist!'¹¹⁹. The sentence captures several points of interest. First, there is a physical distancing ('an ocean') between the idea of productive and speculative capital. We see it visually too since the father refuses to dine in the same room as the rest of his family. Also, that 'everything goes down the drain' (*tutto va in malora*) expresses the typical view by which speculative capital, i.e. finance, is a parasite which corrupts, weakens and degrades a healthy and productive body, in this case agriculture¹²⁰. This point is confirmed when one of the peasants, enraged by the new management under Giovanni, shouts 'enough is enough [...] look at agriculture, in what state it is [...] one can't go on like that!'¹²¹.

Further, the epithet 'Mr. Modernist', which is deployed in a mocking way (hopefully the mower will slice Giovanni's buttocks), reinforces the point discussed above that this peasant film confronts modernity, though its peasants are on the receiving end of the technological tide, rather than active contributors to its construction. The distinction between speculative and productive capital is reiterated when Alfredo senior takes his life, hanging himself in the cows stable. Here, old Leo Dalcò utters a revealing sentence: 'At least you and I knew each other. I knew you were in charge. But now, who knows what's going to happen...'¹²². Just as finance moves immense sums of capital across continents – indeed,

¹¹⁸ L. Quart, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹¹⁹ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 1st 42'.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*, 1st 1h 45'.

¹²² *Ibidem*, 1st 59'.

across oceans – at speed-record times and from-and-to unknown places, the traditional way of production is over, and a new modernization based on anonymous speculative capital looms, with uncertainty creeping in.

The second element of our *schemata* is the ‘village madman’. This normally exists as a real person, and is the carrier of some truth and of the correct understanding of the world. While this trope is not an exclusive characteristic of peasant films, it nevertheless occurs with a high frequency in this genre. Interestingly, and more specific to the historical phase to which these films belong, the Basaglia Law (*legge 180/1978* also known as *legge Basaglia*) that closed down sanatoriums in Italy was passed in 1978¹²³. The films mirror the issue. In *1900* there are actually two madmen. One is the madman proper, the other is the hunchback Rigoletto. Both are bearers of the truth and understand reality with its problems. The madman enters the narrative when the fascists are beating Olmo to death, after he has been accused of having murdered a child – in reality, Attila had committed the crime. Madly (and purportedly falsely), the madman claims to have killed the boy, so that the fascists quit hitting Olmo and take the cuckoo away¹²⁴. His function is thus salvific, miraculous. Later, the madman informs Olmo that he knows the truth about the crime, having seen the murderer. However, he is unable to recognize Attila because – another truth – ‘They [fascists] all look alike. Wearing black shirts, they all look the same’¹²⁵.

And, the madman continues, while nonchalantly strolling away towards the line of the (radiant) horizon, ‘and I walk and walk, I never stop. But where is socialism?’¹²⁶. The scene synthetizes the message of the film. It is the central question for leftists in the 1970s. Indeed, this is not only the madman’s question. It is the issue of a film that confronts liminal modernity and hopes in socialism; it is the query of this five-hour reel. Speaking the truth, the madman does not have answers, but poses relevant questions. He indicates the path, but it is us who need to walk it. Interestingly, Bernardo Bertolucci’s brother, Giuseppe Bertolucci, asked through Roberto Benigni the same question in *Berlinguer ti voglio bene* (*Berlinguer: I love you*) which was released in 1977, one year after *1900*. In this case, the entire film is crazy. In it, Benigni responds – but it is not a statement or the formation of a dogmatic answer; it is a windy dream

¹²³ R. Mollica, *From Antonio Gramsci to Franco Basaglia: The Theory and Practice of the Italian Psychiatric Reform*, “International Journal of Mental Health” 1985, 14, 1–2, pp. 22–41.

¹²⁴ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 2nd 49’.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, 2nd 52’.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*.

to open possibilities – that ‘communism is like before you jerk off for the first time, you cum in bed by yourself’¹²⁷.

The second madman of *1900* is the hunchback Rigoletto. He is some sort of jester who is related to the Dalcò family and he, too, speaks the voice of truth and correct judgement. We wrote above that Bertolucci faulted modernity insofar as it was capitalist. Thus, in the film, when the Dalcò extended family of peasants is sitting at the meal table, we hear one of the peasants accusing the others of being ‘enemies of progress, that’s what you are’ because of their criticism of the dump rake¹²⁸. The hunchback’s response is straightforward as much as it is instructive of the dynamics of capital exploitation: ‘what master? It is we who pay the machine with our labor’¹²⁹. And Rigoletto adds, standing up, his face illuminated by the radiant sun, ‘Here, the one who went to the [Peasant] League rally is only me. Only those who understand go to the rally, and then go around preaching justice in the remote villages where the honest peasant slaves away while the rich bourgeois despises his sweat’¹³⁰. Typically, he is laughed at, and in this case other peasants even throw food at him. The madman offers the key to understand and explain the world, yet he is rarely comprehended.

Recalling Togliatti’s strategy for postwar Italy and Bertolucci’s dissatisfaction with the PCI line helps to notice that Rigoletto speaks only of two classes: agrarian workers and bourgeois. This is what Togliatti had cautioned against, for example in his famous speech ‘Ceto medio e Emilia rossa’ (middle strata and red Emilia). There, he explained that that dichotomic vision had been the weakness of the socialists after the First World War (which had led to fascism) and argued instead that winning over the middle strata was necessary to avoid the re-occurrence of the dictatorship¹³¹. The fact that Rigoletto, the truth teller, supports the thesis indicates Bertolucci’s rebellious spirit and criticism of the PCI gradualist and evolutionary strategy of ‘reform communism’ described above.

In *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, the madman is the local beggar who travels from house to house in search of charity. Just like in *Novecento*, he is the bearer of the correct reading of the world. Thus, anytime he enters a house, he walks to the deity icon or the shrine, bringing everyone to pray. He is a priest in disguise, also bringing salvation¹³². The language

¹²⁷ G. Bertolucci (dir.), *Berlinguer ti voglio bene*, A.M.A. Film 1977, 43’.

¹²⁸ B. Bertolucci, *op. cit.*, 1st 32’.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, 1st 33’.

¹³¹ P. Togliatti, *op. cit.*, pp. 688–719.

¹³² Gladych, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

that these follies speak is similar. Olmi's beggar is mute while Bertolucci's madman speaks what nobody understands. In this sense, these peasant films offer an image of the peasant community to explain and make sense of the modern world. They offer valuable teachings, personified by the madman. The key lesson is that the world is absurd. They are not mad, the world is. There surfaces the idea of traditional wisdom which is typically attached to these constructed imageries of peasants – but also of, amongst others, Indigenous Peoples, think of Chief Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) or *Pocahontas* (1995)¹³³ – in opposition to scientific knowledge that stems out of cold laboratories (and is systematically applied in mental hospitals).

Before we conclude, it is interesting to notice that these madmen (just like Chief Bromden) have a close relation to nature, out of which they come and to which they return. We have seen that in *Novecento* the madman strolls away towards the fields; in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, the cuckoo arrives from there, and the construction of the scene with him almost emerging from the soil and out of the mist aims to highlight his belonging to the wild and yet-to-be modernized world; Chief Bromden escapes the sanatorium and runs 'back to nature'. This has culinary ramifications too, and can be seen as a response to the 'Green Revolution' which from the 1960s meant that agricultural production leaped due to 'technological mastery over nature'¹³⁴. Then, the peasantry – not unlike Indigenous Peoples – is used as the stereotyped repository of the values of the past, through a (conservative) process which, as we said above, often excludes them from progressive change and, therefore, from the possibility to be part, let alone contribute to the formation, of modernity.

CONCLUSION

Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Novecento* are two Italian masterpieces. They deserve to be watched, enjoyed and studied. In this article, we placed them in a dialogue which was fruitful of resources to help scholars unpack the image of peasants that they offered. The overarching discovery was that the liminal period represented by the 1970s, a phase that followed two decades of relative stability, as has already been established in the literature¹³⁵, also morphed

¹³³ J. Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and film*, Lincoln 1999.

¹³⁴ P. Bevilacqua, *Un'agricoltura per il futuro della terra. Il sistema di produzione del cibo come praradigm di una nuova era*, Bra 2022, p. 157.

¹³⁵ R. Forlenza, B. Thomassen, *op. cit.*, pp. 209–237.

a particular image of peasants in Italian filmography. This is in line with Guerra's reading of Italian peasant films¹³⁶. What constituted this 'turning point' for peasant imagery included various and contingent factors, such as the shocks of the Years of Lead that troubled Italian society against the background of tectonic economic changes epitomized by the 1971 Nixonian unpegging of the golden standard.

Three coordinates offered useful angles to strengthen our case. Machines, landscape and historical movement all proved that peasants became tools in the hands of Olmi and Bertolucci to confront modernity. Because of this, peasants could not in fact belong to it. The focus on specific tropes, like the productive peasant or the madman, finally confirmed the findings of our contribution with regards to the 1970s liminality. The development of a peasant *schemata*, an original application to peasant films of Gombrich's intuition¹³⁷, can help researchers to eschew or at least be more aware of certain stereotypes that still inform the production of the image of peasants. To this, we want to add that peasants have often been glossed over completely in the scientific literature on films, in contrast to other marginalised groups¹³⁸, determining one further, valuable aspect of this article.

But this is merely a starting point. To begin with, as we mentioned earlier, an up-to-date study of the longer tradition of peasants in films in the Italian context remains to be done. While specific studies on some authors are not unprecedented¹³⁹, mutating our perspective and looking at these films from the specific standpoint of peasants' representation would yield insightful results. Similarly, a comparison across cultures – think of DK and Hugh Welchman's *Chłopi (The Peasants)* (2023) or of Yinru Chenyan (*Return to Dust*) (2022) by Chinese director Li Ruijun – may serve well to overcome facile views which degenerate in stern relativism, instead encouraging us to rethink the national-international nexus with regards to that magnificent issue which is the role, image and history of peasants in the world.

¹³⁶ M. Guerra, *op. cit.*, pp. 239–255.

¹³⁷ E.H. Gombrich, *op. cit.*

¹³⁸ R. Dyer, J. Pidduck, *Now You See It. Studies in Lesbian and Gay Films*, London 2003; J. Kilpatrick, *op. cit.*; one obvious exception is Tom Brass, *op. cit.*

¹³⁹ M. Morandini, *op. cit.*; G.P. Dell'Acqua, *op. cit.*; S. Socci, *op. cit.*

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