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Planes, Trains, Automobiles, Bicycles, Spaceships, and an Elephant: Images of Movement from Neorealism to the *commedia all'italiana*¹

Robert A. Rushing

Italy in Movement

Luca Gorgolini's recent social history of Italy in the 1950s is titled *L'Italia in movimento*, and features on the front cover a snapshot of a woman emerging from the driver's seat of a new Fiat 600 (fig. 1).² Its predecessor, the Fiat 500, was one of the most potent symbols of the economic boom and the newfound mass consumer culture that began to characterize Italy in the postwar period—Paul Ginsborg calls it a “dream machine” more than a “means of transport,”³ and likens the way that it surpasses mere utilitarian functions in postwar consumerist Italy to another dream machine that provided moving images: television. The image on the cover of Gorgolini's book, however, serves to underscore the play on meaning in the title, *L'Italia in movimento*: the fact that, in postwar Italy, the various kinds of social movement that were in play (which included, but were not limited to, newfound affluence and concomitant leisure time and consumerism, emergent youth culture, and changing gender roles, particularly for women) were also reflected in and tied to completely literal forms of movement. This connection between the literal and the metaphorical is concretized in the moving image/image of movement.

The woman on Gorgolini's cover wears her hair in a short, modern style, sports a dress that bares her legs, looks assertively and directly at the camera, and has not only been driving the vehicle but appears to have been driving alone, traveling wherever she likes. A new car, and a new woman, for decidedly new times. Her relaxed, natural smile indicates that her social, sexual, and economic mobility, all condensed into the quintessential form of literal modern mobility, all produce a concomitant emotion or affect.⁴

¹ In the interest of completeness, this essay also refers to horses, ships, scooters, trucks, buses, and flying brooms. And there are actually two elephants. I'd like to offer thanks to colleagues and friends who have commented on this. A list, no doubt incomplete, would include: Jackie Reich, Francesco Pitassio, Alan O'Leary, Carlo Anelli, Giacomo Manzoli, Sandy Waters, Antonio Vitti, Vetri Nathan, and Tamao Nakahara. I would like to thank as well my anonymous readers for this journal, who offered many excellent and useful suggestions for improvement.

² The photo is—if just barely—anachronistic for Gorgolini's given subject area (the 1950s), since it is from 1962, and the Fiat 600 didn't begin production until 1960. In many ways, however, the kinds of social movements that characterized Italy in the 1950s took on their most concrete and visible forms in the early 1960s—including *commedia all'italiana*. The photo is taken from the University of Bologna's online archive of casual (non-art) historical photos, ImaGo, which offers a “memoria del quotidiano” (memory of the everyday). See <http://www.imago.rimini.unibo.it/laraccolta/raccolta.htm>.

³ Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State: 1980–2001* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 83.

⁴ If it is historically somewhat too early to invoke the “cruel optimism” of Berlant's neoliberalism (*Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)), we will see that there are a number of reasons to feel that this image in Italian culture of the 1950s—the young woman, independent and mobile—is highly fraught, and we will also see that more generally, the entire promise of mobility in an Italian context is equally fraught, especially within the moving image.



Fig. 1. Woman exiting a Fiat 600 in 1962. Photo: ImaGo (<http://www.imago.rimini.unibo.it>).

It's not too early, however, to notice something curious, perhaps contradictory in the image, namely the ways in which it combines not only motion and emotion, but also movement and stasis. On the one hand, it is a snapshot, a frozen moment in time, and on the other hand, it is clearly a snapshot of time unfolding, the woman exiting her vehicle; on the one hand, it is a picture of the image of mobility (the Fiat), and on the other hand, the car is obviously stopped. On a formal level, the image combines—as photographs often do—multiple temporal registers. There is not only the background motionlessness (Barthes' *studium*), but also the emergence of movement from inside the vehicle (the *punctum*)—and of course, Barthes' most provocative point, the curious temporality of older photographs, which for him is always the awareness of the eventual death of the subject of the photograph.⁵ We see a moment in the past of expectation, a woman who looks towards the future—more than half a century ago.

Intriguingly, although the bulk of Gorgolini's book is dedicated to various movements that are both social and literal (migrations from south to north, movements from rural zones to urban centers, changing gender roles, the state of the mass transit after the war, and the development of highways and gas stations for the emerging car and leisure culture), one section of the book is dedicated to Italian film, and it too makes a journey: “dal neorealismo alla commedia all'italiana” (from neorealism to the *commedia all'italiana*).⁶ Here, Gorgolini discusses the general trend of the Italian film industry in the postwar period, as well as discussing the reasons that television made slow inroads in Italy, compared to the US, where it cut into film attendance

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 96.

⁶ Luca Gorgolini, *L'Italia in movimento. Storia sociale degli anni Cinquanta* (Milan: Mondadori, 2013), 57–63.

very quickly. One particular difference that Gorgolini notes is that Italian television made almost no effort to capture the youth market, while films beginning in the 1950s “presentavano come protagonista un emergente universo giovanile” (presented an emerging world of young people as their protagonist).⁷ By implication, neorealism had suffered at the box office because it attempted to portray the poverty, misery, and destruction left after the war, rather than the seductive and emergent world of youth, vitality, luxury, and new consumer goods.



Fig. 2. The independent female driver (<http://en.wheelsage.org/fiat/500/ii/41377/pictures/voh407/>).

Gorgolini suggests that comedy is a useful site for rendering visible some of the anxieties that Italy had about the social changes associated with the boom—especially changing gender roles.⁸ Although Gorgolini says that the two issues that were most notable in the comedies of the

⁷ Gorgolini, *L'Italia in movimento*, 58.

⁸ Gorgolini, *L'Italia in movimento*, 62–63. This understanding of *commedia all'italiana* as a productive and meaningful site of social critique, if often a conservative one, is found in accounts of the genre on both sides of the Atlantic. See, for example, the accounts given by Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cent'anni di cinema italiano, 2: dal 1945 ai*

1950s were youth culture and women, he discusses exclusively the figuration of women. This representation in the cinema, according to Gorgolini, is profoundly anxious and does a kind of double ideological work: on the one hand, images of the emancipated woman were irresistible for film, since they were seductive, modern, and cosmopolitan, while on the other hand, Italian films of the era generally deployed the possibility of changing gender roles only to foreclose that possibility. This structure Gorgolini calls “modernizzazione conservatrice” (conservative modernization), and he gives the example of a debate about the proper behavior of Anna in *Ragazze d’oggi*, a debate that takes place between her fiancé (who is in favor of acceptable aspects of modern gender) and her father (who sustains a traditional view of gender roles).⁹ Anna does not get to speak at all, and indeed, Italian comedy is almost invariably presented from the male perspective, foregrounding male concerns about an emergent modernity. Fullwood similarly notes the striking divergence between Italian advertising images, which often depicted women driving, successfully and independently (fig. 2), and the comparatively rare presence of female drivers in films—appearing often, if not always, as the stereotyped “bad female driver.”¹⁰

There is something of a missed opportunity in Gorgolini’s depiction of the movement from neorealism to *commedia all’italiana*, however. Unlike the play between his title and cover image, there is no coupling of his discussion of social mobility in film with actual, literal movement in film. In looking at images of mobility in the movement from neorealism to *commedia all’italiana*, however, we can see the essential outlines of what Gorgolini describes as a conservative and reluctant embrace of modernity. Where neorealism depicted Italy trapped in a relentless and unstoppable downward spiral—quite literally, at times, as we shall see—early Italian comedies of the 1950s tried to believe in the possibility of a precarious and risky step forward into a modernity that could do something more than simply stall out; finally, by the early 1960s, as it became clear that socio-economic mobility was not simply an evanescent fantasy, *commedia all’italiana* depicts this emerging mobility as something that comes at a steep price. Increasingly pain, suffering, and humiliation—even death—are not enough of a price for the modern Italian subject (a subject in Italian comedy who will be almost invariably male, and not female) to pay for access to the opportunities for the “automobility” of an ambiguous and anxious modernity.¹¹

giorni nostri (Rome: Laterza, 2004)—his observations on Italian comedy are scattered throughout much of the volume, but see particularly 311–30; Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 180–217; Maggie Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 60–96; and the entirety of Maurizio Grande’s *Abiti nuziali e biglietti di banca* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1986). Giorgio De Vincenti, with the same gesture of limited approval, calls the genre “critico ma non innovativo” (critical but not innovative), “Introduzione,” in *Storia del cinema italiano 10: 1960–1964*, ed. Giorgio De Vincenti, (Venice: Marsilio, Edizioni di Bianco e Nero, 2001), 14.

⁹ Gorgolini, *L’Italia in movimento*, 63. *Ragazze d’oggi* (Girls of Today), dir. Luigi Zampa, 1957, Carlo Ponti Cinematografica.

¹⁰ Natalie Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space: Comedy, Italian Style* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 153–56.

¹¹ See Katie Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving Through Film, Fiction, and Television* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 18–24 for the concept of “automobility,” which brings together the subject’s desire for personal autonomy and socio-economic mobility. Mills, like others, finds that automobility takes its concrete form in the image of the car in film.

Neorealism

Neorealist films showcase a concern with the lack of social and economic mobility in a variety of literalized ways, from the one-legged Romoletto in *Roma: città aperta*, who hobbles about on crutches, to Umberto's inability to pay for the bus and his attempted suicide on the tram tracks that closes the film *Umberto D.*¹² Neorealism often looks backwards in its images of movement and mobility—Giuseppe and Pasquale in *Sciuscià* dream of a horse, not a futurist race car or airplane, and the shantytown inhabitants of *Miracolo a Milano* have to go farther back still into a mythic past when they fly away from their suffering on magic broomsticks.¹³ Outside of fantasies of mobility, however, the protagonists in these films are both literally and metaphorically stuck, completely immobile like the hundreds of young women on a staircase seeking a job in *Roma ore undici*, or having lost their means of transport (which is also their means of livelihood), as is the case of the Valastros family and their fishing boat in *La terra trema*.¹⁴ Indeed, *La terra trema*, like virtually all neorealist narratives, tells a story not of stagnation or of stasis, but of an active fall, a regression back. It is not that people can't get ahead, but rather that, even expending all of their energy, they cannot stay in place. In *Roma ore undici*, this finds its most literalized form. Two hundred female applicants turn up for a single opening for a position of secretary to an accountant, and they wait in a vast line arrayed around the spiral staircase of the building where the accountant's studio is located (fig. 3). Far from being a spiral of upward movement that might represent the right kind of socio-economic mobility for a single, lucky girl, the women waiting in line fail even to “go nowhere”—instead, the staircase collapses, causing numerous injuries and one fatality (the film was based on a true story, and scripted by Zavattini and others). No one gets the job: the film's final shot is of the same young woman whom we first saw in line, still waiting for a position that no longer exists.

A well-known example in neorealism of this regressive movement, this fall down the socio-economic ladder is *Ladri di biciclette*. After what appears to be months of jobless hunger, hardship, and humiliation, Antonio Ricci finally receives a decent position that will allow him to care for his wife and son—but it is a position that requires that he have a bicycle. In order to procure one, he and his wife must go still farther into debt by hocking their wedding linens. The bicycle is, of course, immediately stolen, and in desperation, Ricci throws away what little money he has left on a fortune teller whose advice proves useless. In despair, he attempts to steal a bicycle from a gentleman who looks as if he could easily afford the loss, a theft that his son accidentally witnesses. Ricci is immediately caught and publicly humiliated in front of his sobbing son. The film ends as the two of them walk away, shoulders stooped, heads hanging low, unable to afford even the bus (free for Bruno, the child, but not his father). Their figures disappear into the crowd.

¹² *Roma: città aperta* (Rome, Open City), dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1946, Excelsa Film; *Umberto D.*, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1952, Rizzoli Film.

¹³ *Sciuscià* (Shoeshine), dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1946, Società Cooperativa Alfa Cinematografica; *Miracolo a Milano* (Miracle in Milan), dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1951, Produzione De Sica.

¹⁴ *Roma ore undici* (Rome 11:00), dir. Giuseppe De Santis, 1952, Titanus; *La terra trema* (The Earth Trembles), dir. Luchino Visconti, 1948, Universal Film. This, of course, is equally true of *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves), dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948, Produzione De Sica, to which I'll return shortly.



Fig. 3. The endless spiral staircase of job seekers. *Roma: ore undici*, 1957, Titanus.

While almost any neorealist film demonstrates the same concerns with mobility, *Ladri di biciclette* is the most focused on a literal form of movement. *Ladri di biciclette* frequently features sequences that invest the bicycle with a powerful emotional resonance—when Antonio first gets his bicycle out of hock, he casually leans it against an exterior wall while he and his wife go briefly upstairs, provoking anxiety in the viewer who knows, from the title at least, that his whole livelihood is at stake (the bicycle is still there when they return). Later in the film, it seems as if everyone has a bicycle except Antonio, the street market where Antonio and his friends look for it is crowded with hundreds of bicycles, and then the bicycle fragments into parts: bicycle parts, tires, horns, wheels, frames. Schoonover has argued that neorealism presents its viewers with stark images of suffering bodies as a form of “compassion-triggering testimony” that might sway a cosmopolitan, globally minded viewer, but within the diegesis of neorealist films, there appears to be scant possibility for any movement, including social or political movement, that could alleviate the characters’ suffering.¹⁵ In the completely literal sense that this

¹⁵ Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xxxii. Schoonover’s intriguing idea is that the international spectator is emotionally moved by the spectacle of the suffering Italian body, but with an emotional and physical distance. The effect, he argues, is to elicit a similarly mediated and distanced response: international aid, the Marshall Plan, or other distant altruism. This may very well have been how neorealism functioned outside of Italy, although Schoonover seems to be claiming that the films were *designed* to elicit this reaction, a more problematic claim.

article is attempting to highlight, neorealism doesn't go anywhere—as I have argued elsewhere, the temporality of neorealism is what Linda Williams identifies as the time of melodrama: too late.¹⁶ Neorealism's literary predecessor is not, of course, the romantic realism of Manzoni, but the hopeless despair of Verga, whose cycle of realist novels was to be titled “I vinti” (the vanquished, the beaten ones). In his famous preface to *I Malavoglia* (the source for Visconti's *La terra trema*), Verga makes it clear that he is both uninterested in the victors in the struggle for survival, and that whatever victors there may be, they, too, will eventually be revealed as “i vinti,” the beaten down and vanquished. Verga initially metaphorizes history as an image of water in dangerous movement, “la fiumana del progresso” (the flood of progress), but shortly changes this metaphor of movement for another: “Il cammino fatale” (the fatal road).¹⁷ This is the road that Antonio Ricci and his son Bruno are following at the close of *Ladri di biciclette*. Let us take a potentially different road, however, and follow the trajectory laid out in *L'Italia in movimento*, from neorealism to the *commedia all'italiana*.

Is this really the road that Antonio Ricci and his son Bruno are following at the close of *Ladri di biciclette*? Perhaps, but one might also see some of these sequences of immobility a little differently: *Ladri di biciclette* was celebrated for, among other reasons, its clarity in establishing Antonio and Bruno not as Hollywood individuals, but part of a collective, mass experience. The analytic, “objective” and documentary character of neorealism might also be understood as an accurate diagnosis of a social ill; why should it be faulted for not also providing a cure? While perhaps some neorealist films really do follow the darker path of Verga, *Ladri di biciclette* (and also *Roma: città aperta* in its first half, and almost all of *Miracolo a Milano*) are also shot through with elements that indicate a potential, if foreclosed, aperture to a different register: comedy. For all the evident seriousness of the film, De Sica was a gifted comedic actor (as we will see later), and was not above using a comic scene to undercut Antonio's increasingly frantic desperation to get his bicycle back: as Antonio races to follow the old man who witnessed and assisted in the theft, he realizes his son is not following him. Bruno has for some time been searching for an out of the way place to pee, and his father surprises him just as he's about to start. Bruno's leap of surprise and facial expression never fail to make audiences laugh—it is a much-needed break in the film's increasing tension, but it also marks a specific register, the clash between adult responsibilities and the (juvenile) impulses of the body, that marks the thematic backbone of *commedia all'italiana*.¹⁸ It's clear that this comic impulse isn't the direction that

¹⁶ Robert Rushing, “De Sica's *The Children Are Watching Us*: Neorealist Cinema and Sexual Difference,” *Studies in European Cinema* 6/2-3 (2009): 110. Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44/4 (1991): 11. Christopher Wagstaff, in *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), also identifies “the genre ... that categorizes neorealist Italian cinema” as “melodrama” (61), but his use of the term is, by his own admission (60), rather idiosyncratic in its optimism, and ultimately not compatible with my understanding of the term or, frankly, Italian neorealist cinema. Wagstaff, for example, claims that Antonio's search for a lost idyllic time (when he had a job and a bicycle) does not end with him conquering that loss through heroic action, but with his more contemplative re-discovery of the “Garden of Eden” that was with him all along, namely his son, Bruno (64). I find Wagstaff's notion of a re-discovery of a “garden within” wholly incompatible with how I see these films: in the entire final sequence, Antonio only glances at Bruno once for a split second, before bursting into tears, and he continues to sob as they walk out of the camera's view. His understanding of neorealist melodrama as a space of contemplation rather than action maps surprisingly well, however, onto Deleuze's claim that the “time image” (an image before which we can only contemplate and think, experience time) emerges precisely in Italian neorealism; I briefly discuss Deleuze toward the end of this article.

¹⁷ Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia* (Pisa: Aonia Edizioni, 2012), 7.

¹⁸ Thanks to Marguerite Waller for pointing out the “seeds” of *commedia all'italiana* present in *Ladri di biciclette*.

neorealism follows, of course, but—at least for some neorealist films—this was not a failure to imagine alternatives so much as it was a question of a historical and political opportunity that had yet to present itself, namely the economic boom of the 1950s.

The Anxiety of Mobility

Alessandro Blasetti's 1955 comedy, *Peccato che sia una canaglia*, derives its comic force from the most touchy of subjects: race, class, and gender.¹⁹ Class is an evident source of anxiety in the film, particularly the postwar concern with socio-economic mobility. By 1955, Italy was beginning its massive postwar economic expansion, the *miracolo economico*, or economic miracle. While neorealism had been left behind (most scholars point to *Umberto D* in 1952 as the last “canonical” neorealist film), memories of the rather intense postwar poverty and desolation were still fresh, and it was far from clear that the good life that was emerging would last. In the film, this anxiety over mobility is incarnated in Paolo (Marcello Mastroianni in one of his first roles, and his first collaboration with Sofia Loren), a taxi driver who has only just managed to pay for his license and vehicle; he is on the verge of economic independence, an independence that depends entirely on his car, which he cares for obsessively.

In a very real sense, *Peccato che sia una canaglia* demands to be read against *Ladri di biciclette*, since the actor with top billing in *Peccato* is De Sica himself. Even more importantly, both films *tell exactly the same story*: a man in precarious economic circumstances searches throughout Rome for two men who stole or attempted to steal the means of transport that is required for his job, constantly frustrated by the indifference of official institutions, and by the willingness of society to shield the criminals. It is only the register or tone of the film that changes: De Sica's neorealist film is a tragedy because the theft is a success and the victim lives in a *verista* world in which recovery is impossible; Blasetti's is a comedy since the theft is a failure, and the protagonist lives in a world of possibility, however precarious. In both cases, however, it is not an accident that the object in peril is a literal form of mobility.

Although the film opens with a shot of Paolo lovingly polishing his vehicle, the precious car is immediately threatened by a friend who is backing up. Much of the comedy centers around Paolo's desire to take care of this fragile capital investment, and the fact that Paolo himself is led, over and over again, to damage the car. He threatens two would-be thieves with a tire iron, but then accidentally dents a fender with it. Later he runs into another vehicle when he sees Lina, played by Sofia Loren, whom he suspects of aiding the would-be thieves (his suspicions are well founded), and he ends up in the hospital (fig. 4), his jaw bandaged shut. Already, the film makes clear an equation that runs throughout the *commedia all'italiana*—the car is simply the exteriorized form of the male subject. Lanzoni calls it “the natural extension of [the protagonist's] own body,” and Giacobelli uses much the same language, “quasi un'appendice di se stesso” (almost an appendix of himself).²⁰ Indeed, as Figure 4 indicates, the real link may not be simply between the car and hero's body, but rather with his interiority, with his psyche. In other words, we should understand that the various comedic risks to the car in *Peccato* are risks to the male psyche of Paolo, but also to the Italian male psyche in general. As the car is damaged, so is the hero's sense of self, of self-worth—and his literal, economic worth. Fullwood

¹⁹ *Peccato che sia una canaglia* (Too Bad She's Bad), dir. Alessandro Blasetti, 1955, Documento Film.

²⁰ Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style: The Golden Age of Italian Film Comedies* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 91. Enrico Giacobelli, *La commedia all'italiana* (Rome: Gramese, 1990), 109.

has an excellent summary of the equation between men and cars in the *commedia all'italiana*, one that also captures how the genre objectifies both genders: “if women are represented as objects, men are represented *by* them.”²¹

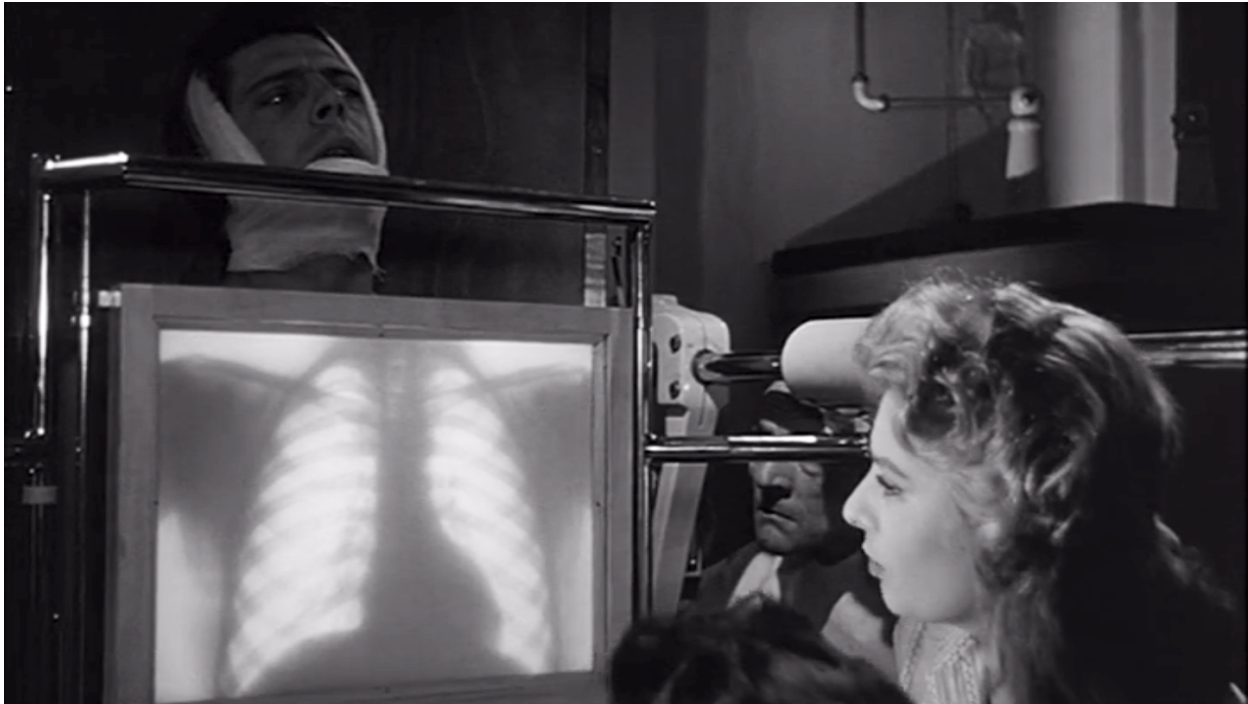


Fig. 4. Paolo's suffering interior. *Peccato che sia una canaglia*, 1955, Documento Film.

Indeed, mobility itself often seems to be at stake in *Peccato che sia uno canaglia*, often in a completely literal fashion. Along the way to the beach, we see a variety of different endings to the image of emergent mobility in the Italian 1950s: a motorcycle with a sidecar that's had a flat tire, a car that has broken down and won't start, a Vespa pulled off to the side—its riders, a young couple, couldn't wait, and are making out on the grass at the roadside, a new form of sexual liberation that was considered profoundly risky by the dominant culture.²² The genre's attraction to glamorous images of modern movement is here counterbalanced by its anxiety about breakdowns and stasis. In short, in contrast to neorealism, mobility is now seen as possible, but risky, and perhaps more than risky—perhaps a liberty that is not permitted, a transgression to be punished. The film seems to be enchanted with images of mobility and movement: we see Vespas, cars, buses, trains, and most of the film's action takes place on the street or in locations directly related to transportation (train stations, garages, etc.). At times, the mobility seems to be triumphalist. After Paolo, distracted once again by Lina, gets into an accident with a car full of Indians. Lina's father, something of a professional scam artist, is sure he will be able to foist blame for the accident onto the victims, and he explains to the Indian ambassador that Indians cannot understand the rules that automobiles must follow because they, as non-European primitives, are used to riding elephants instead. Italy's arrival as a modern, mobile society would seem to be encapsulated in these contrasting images—the (modern) Italian

²¹ Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, 137.

²² Gorgolini, *L'Italia in movimento*, 62–63.

in his or her Seicento, the (primitive) Indian atop an elephant. But Italy's position as a newly modern country is revealed as precarious; the ambassador counters that in India, like Italy, there are many more automobiles than elephants.²³

Indeed, mobility is a central part of the cinematic representation of Italy more generally in the 1950s and 60s—the moving images of Italy in this period are very literally images of movement. This is just as visible in Hollywood films about Italy; perhaps the single most iconic image of Italy in the 1950s is the tour of ancient Rome on the back of a Vespa in *Roman Holiday*.²⁴ The image of Hepburn and Peck in rapid motion in front of the Coliseum became a way of establishing the mix of modernity and traditional culture that still charms American audiences (the image was and is equally iconic for Italians, if perhaps in the opposite historical direction—Italy is a nation of the past, but also the modernity of Audrey Hepburn on a Vespa). The charming, half-modern, half-traditional mode of transport as a way of symbolizing the allure and fascination—sexualized and romanticized—appears again in *Three Coins in the Fountain*.²⁵ Of the three lonely women in the film, two are courted by Italian men. One of the men is marked as untrustworthy (aristocratic, unctuous, seductive), not least because he flies his own plane and offers unsuspecting young American women private day trips for two to Venice—day trips that always “accidentally” turn into overnights. His counterpart, however, is a simple man of the people who drives a beaten up old jalopy. Moreover, the vehicle is in fact an American military vehicle (a Dodge WC 51 from 1942), one that needs a whole crowd of cheerful young Italians to slow it down or push it up a hill to the farm where they will all have lunch. Italians in the American cinematic imagination do not appear to have the individual, free-spirited mobility that Peck and Hepburn do; they remain in a matrix of pre-modern agricultural and rural collectivity. The most reliable Italian character is the one whose vehicle is most tightly linked to American culture and least coupled to the social mobility and social movements produced by modernity.

Strikingly, Italian films of the period gave much the same impression. As we've already seen, the automobile was the most potent symbol of the emerging consumerist culture and socio-economic mobility in the postwar period in Italy. And scholarship on the *commedia all'italiana* has long recognized that the car is one of the most important characters in the new kind of comedy that appears after the war. Mariapia Comand calls the car and the beach the central figures in Italian films of the early 1960s, while Lanzoni calls the automobile “a formidable emblem that represented the ‘sign of the times.’”²⁶ Fullwood gives what is likely the most

²³ This, in turn, is an allusion (and thanks to Francesco Pitassio for pointing it out) to an earlier neorealist comedy, *Buongiorno, elefante!* (Hello, Elephant), dir. Gianni Franciolini, 1952, Rizzoli Film. In that film, De Sica plays an impoverished schoolteacher who gives an impromptu tour of Rome to an Indian prince (played by Sabu, who began his film career as an elephant driver), and is rewarded with a very impractical gift: a baby elephant. Both Italy and India seem to have automobiles and elephants, and many more of the former than the latter.

²⁴ *Roman Holiday*, dir. William Wyler, 1955, Paramount Pictures.

²⁵ *Three Coins in the Fountain*, dir. Jean Negulesco, 1954, Twentieth Century Fox.

²⁶ Mariapia Comand, “L'automobile e la spiaggia,” in *Storia del cinema italiano 10: 1960–1964*, ed. Giorgio De Vincenti (Venice: Marsilio, Edizioni di Bianco e Nero, 2001), 238–39. In that same volume, see also Aldo Viganò, where he notes the importance of the trip as a thematic/narrative element for the new genre. Aldo Viganò, “La commedia all'italiana,” in *Storia del cinema italiano 10: 1960–1964*, ed. Giorgio De Vincenti (Venice: Marsilio, Edizioni di Bianco e Nero, 2001), 243. Lanzoni, like many critics of the *commedia*, gives the automobile a small section of its own, as if it were a minor but still important character, actor, or director. Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style*, 56. Enrico Giacobelli assigns it a more significant role as one of eight particularly significant commonplaces in the Italian comedy—only the entry for the beach is longer—and he nicely explains the particular cultural

extended account of the love affair between 1950s Italian *commedia all'italiana* and the image of the car, noting that it is particularly “the everyday activities of car purchase, ownership and driving [that] appear repeatedly in the films.”²⁷ Although criticism almost invariably characterizes the image of the car as a love affair, it is a curiously ambiguous and anxious one, part of what Bondanella terms the “undercurrent of social malaise” that typified the *commedia*.²⁸ Indeed, it is not simply the car that poses an alluring risk, but all forms of transport. Lina’s father (De Sica), for instance, plays a classy, well-mannered thief *artiste* (known popularly as “the Professor”) who specializes in stealing luggage that hurried travelers, just arrived at Rome’s Ostiense station, have set down for a moment. “La gente che scende da un treno arrivato in ritardo è affrettata, preoccupata, distratta,” he says, explaining his trade to his daughter, “e noi lavoriamo sulla distrazione” (People who are getting off a train that’s come in late are in a hurry, worried, distracted, and our job is based on distraction). This is evidently a cautionary tale, of course, and the Professor’s warning is intended for the audience of the film—and it is not limited to upper and middle class forms of mobility. Later, the Professor will make use of his skills to steal a wealthy stranger’s wallet on the bus, as well. If Paolo’s car is the principal symbol for this risky mobility, then the film is fundamentally quite pessimistic about the changes visible in Italy during the economic boom: by the end, the car has more primer than original paint from all the accidents that it has been in (fig. 5); like Paolo’s x-ray, we see it surrounded by professionals who offer a diagnosis: the patient is damaged, but the prognosis is cautiously optimistic. If the universe of neorealism relentlessly closed down any positive possibility for its characters, *commedia all'italiana* appears to open up possibilities with one hand, while partially foreclosing them with the other.



Fig. 5. The once-perfect exterior, now blemish and stain.
Peccato che sia una canaglia, 1955, Documento Film.

significance of each precise type of automobile. Enrico Giacovelli, *La commedia all'italiana* (Rome: Gramese, 1990), 106–11.

²⁷ Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, 132.

²⁸ Bondanella, *History of Italian Cinema*, 181.

The Split Subject of Comedy

De Vincenti offers a remarkable analysis of the *commedia*, describing the modern Italian who attempts to emerge in its unfolding, underlying the pain and difficulty of that birth rather than its joy. The new Italian is:

un soggetto che paga con la frustrazione delle proprie più profonde pulsioni l'adattamento a una società disinvoltamente avviata sulla strada di un diffuso e elettrizzante benessere materiale. ... La commedia all'italiana ci ricorda il prezzo che dobbiamo pagare per acquistare la nostra identità sociale... il benessere materiale, appunto, ma anche una rispettabilità di facciata, e in definitiva il "diritto" di nascondere... ciò che veramente desideriamo. (E qui il prezzo — la rimozione delle pulsioni — e il premio — l'accettazione dell'ipocrisia — vengono a coincidere; chiudendo un cerchio tracciato... all'insegna dell'istinto della morte.)²⁹

[a subject who pays, with the frustration of his deepest drives, for adapting to a society serenely driving down the road to a widespread and electrifying material prosperity.... The *commedia all'italiana* reminds us of the price we have to pay to acquire our social identity ... material prosperity, of course, but also the façade of respectability, and most importantly the "right" to conceal ... what we truly desire. (And here the price—the foreclosure of the drives—and the prize—the acceptance of hypocrisy—come to be one and the same; closing a circle traced under the sign of the death drive.)]

I'll return momentarily to De Vincenti's surprising turn toward the death drive as the real, underlying emotional structure in the *commedia all'italiana*, but the essential idea in this passage is that of Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*—the *commedia* simply renders visible in a comic way the frustration that awaits the modern man, who must, more than ever, restrain his primitive impulses, only now surrounded by liberated women in short skirts and bikinis. If the old style of comedy relied on well-known, pre-established and stereotyped "types," the new protagonist, in Maurizio Grande's terms, must enter adulthood by accepting "la limitazione delle pulsioni soggettive e la ridefinizione dei desideri individuali" (the limiting of his subjective drives and the redefinition of his individual desires).³⁰ Modernity creates desires at the material level (the car, the girl in the bikini) that are increasingly out of sync with the traditional cultural matrix. It is worth noting that this is a historical change. A film like *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* of the 1930s depicts a man who loses his inauthentic desires to be someone above his station; at the end of the film, Bruno is more himself than he was at the beginning.³¹ *Commedia all'italiana* always chronicles the opposite movement, a progression toward radical inauthenticity, an embrace of the new life but at the total cost of the self. The protagonist of the Italian comedy is characterized by the gap between two faces: the raw face of desire and the social façade that must conceal it; the actors who excelled in these roles (Mastroianni, for instance) were expert at

²⁹ De Vincenti, "Introduzione," 14.

³⁰ Grande, *Abiti nuziali*, 69.

³¹ *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* (What Scoundrels Men Are!), dir. Mario Camerini, 1932, Cines.

showing the two always contaminating each other. In a film like *Divorzio all'italiana*, Mastroianni plays the aristocrat Fefé Cefalù, whose public respectability as a loving and faithful husband is not simply a façade, but a constantly and visibly crumbling one.³² The comedic element, of course, is that in order to pursue his desire—his sixteen-year-old cousin—he must induce his wife to cheat on him so that he may kill her without serious legal repercussions. (At the time of the film's release, Sicily still had a perfunctory three-year sentence for such “honor killings.”)



Fig. 6. The bikini and the boat: two iconic images of freedom of movement.
Divorzio all'italiana, 1961, Lux Film.

When the film ends, and Fefé has gotten what he wants, he relaxes at last on his yacht—that “emergent and electrifying prosperity” of the new era—with his new bride, young and wearing a bikini, symbol of modernity (fig. 6). We should note that her image is framed in a way designed to eliminate the anxiety produced by the bikini—although her sexuality is on display, it appears initially to be on display for Fefé’s eyes only. He is apparently at long last a whole person, free of this neurosis-inducing split. His desire is open, and fully reconciled with his public

³² *Divorzio all'italiana* (Divorce, Italian Style), dir. Pietro Germi, 1961, Lux Film. Jaqueline Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity and Italian Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 66–77.

performance. But as Fefé kisses her, she begins a private performance that cannot be integrated: she plays footsie with the handsome young man who sails the boat. Hypocrisy is inevitable. Indeed, the film begins on a train, and ends on a boat, so that our protagonist, plugged into modernization, is always on the move. Fefé's town of Agramonte is divided between, on the one hand, a completely static, even decadent, traditional upper class that sits, immobile, and gossips, and on the other, a working class that is presented as pure mobility: that working class "procedeva gloriosamente sulla via del progresso" (was continuing its glorious march forward), while dancing to American rock-and-roll under Italian posters extolling the Soviet conquest of space and a gleaming metallic rocket ship, the most modern and accelerated form of transport imaginable. If, for Americans, Italy represented a charming mix of modernity and tradition, for Italians, Sicily in the 1960s represented something of the same juxtaposition—the music is modern, but all the dancers are young men, because it was unthinkable, at least for the more rigid gender roles of the working class, for unmarried men and women to dance together. And surely Fefé's "glorious march forward" is meant with irony: the image of the spaceship is presented to us, but its movement is not forward at all. It spins in place.

The mobility exhibited throughout the *commedia all'italiana* is more often that of the car, however. Italian episode comedies like *I motorizzati* and *Le motorizzate*, as De Vincenti suggests, embrace the modernity of the car as an object that elicits our desire but that almost invariably causes pain, anguish, and suffering.³³ *I motorizzati*, for example, is a sort of mockumentary in episodes about the untold suffering brought by desire for the automobile: a wife hijacks her husband's desire for a modest Fiat 500, and compels him to buy an upscale convertible that is beyond his means, causing him to lose a lucrative contract and forcing him to return the convertible (now used) for the 500. Echoing the crimes of *Ladri di biciclette* and *Peccato che sia una canaglia*, two thieves ineptly attempt to steal that same couple's 500, but accidentally return it to the same parking spot from which they had stolen it. In another episode, a young lover misses repeated appointments with his future in-laws because of comic troubles with his car (keys locked inside, tie caught in the window, etc.), and ends up not only losing his fiancée, but accused of pedophilia by the little girl to whom he appeals for help. For those who doubt De Vincenti's suggestion that modernity emerges in the *commedia all'italiana* under the sign of the death drive, a horror film fan gets in the wrong Fiat 1800 in *I motorizzati* by mistake only to discover a dead body in the back seat—a body that he never seems to be able to get rid of without risking discovery; he, too, ends up in the same parking lot where he started. So far, all of these stories are in fact stories of *frustrated* mobility. The final episode of *I motorizzati* is the saga of Nino Borsetti, a simple clerk gives further credence to De Vincenti's curious suggestion that some form of symbolic death is at the heart of the *commedia*. Like Paolo in *Peccato che sia una canaglia*, Nino is obsessed with the perfect condition of his modern status symbol (Giacovelli calls his attachment to the vehicle "morboso, quasi patologico" (sick, almost pathological)), making it psychic torture for him when his boss cooks up an insurance fraud

³³ *I motorizzati*, dir. Camillo Mastrocinque, 1962, Jolly Film; *Le motorizzate*, dir. Marino Girolami, 1963, Bercol Films. The titles, literally, are "The motorized men" and "The motorized women." French posters for *Le motorizzate* translated the title literally as *Les motorisées*, but cleverly offset the "moto" (car) and *risées* (objects of ridicule), while the Spanish opted for the more directly misogynistic *¡Peligro! Mujeres al volante* (Danger! Women Behind the Wheel). As I'll suggest below, the title fundamentally suggests that the modern subject is a passive object animated by the combustion engine, "driven" by a motor. One might even translate the title as "Driven" or "Automatons" (the feminine form is harder to capture in English, but "Auto-mates" or "auto-matrons" might do). Neither film was released in the US or the UK.

requiring Nino to repeatedly damage his pristine Fiat 600, or risk losing his job.³⁴ His car is his alter ego, so what he is destroying in quest for modernity is himself. He can get ahead at work in the new, modern Italy, but only at a cost.

It's notable how severe these psychic punishments for access to modern mobility really are. If neorealism's very structure depended on its protagonists' tragic slide backwards and down, the *commedia all'italiana* only depicts the Italian subject moving forward into modernity at a severe cost, and the cost is inevitably that of the male ego. One can live in modernity only without dignity. Already for *Peccato che sia una canaglia*, Grande doesn't hesitate to refer to Paolo—by way of his car—as “castrato” (castrated) and “ridotto all'impotenza” (reduced to impotence), but it is clear that the humiliations that the *commedia all'italiana* reserve for their male protagonists only ever increase.³⁵ Nino Borsetti's portion of *I motorizzati* is surprisingly hard to watch, since his car is not merely a status symbol, but really the ideal form of himself: modern but modest, unstained and perfect in its humble way. It is an *honest* modernity. His destruction of it, moreover, indicates his complicity and co-optation in the corruption and bad faith that pervade the Italian state, the private sector, and personal life. As Nino approaches the insurance company to give a false version of events, a man standing just outside offers his services as an eyewitness—for whatever people going in and out want him to have seen. Nino concludes the film, not broken, but as a hypocrite—he is now an insurance scam artist who gets hit by cars to collect money, and he inducts none other than the film's director into this new era of modernity, pain and hypocrisy.

A similar insurance scam is the final segment of *Le motorizzate*, another episode film that came out the following year focusing on the perennial hilarity of women drivers. In the episode “Un investimento sicuro” (A Safe Investment), Sandra hits Raimondo while driving her car, a collision that gives birth to both romance and an insurance fraud scheme. Raimondo, too, must be repeatedly hit by cars, but is repeatedly unable to collect anything. The only other option is to reject modernity and be swept away by the flow of history, become one of Verga's “vinti.” It goes almost without saying that throughout *Le motorizzate*, what is at stake is the production of the modern Italian *man*, not woman, despite the title; it doesn't seem to matter, in the end, whether women drive or not—the painful entry into modernity via hypocrisy is for men alone. Günsberg has traced this one-sidedness of the *commedia* and its concerns to the gendering of consumption in modern consumer societies—even as masculinity becomes also defined through the consumption and ownership of status symbols, of which the car is the “masculine fetish object,” one moreover that is “the most versatile and amenable to the filmic process.”³⁶ In short, there is once again a split in the male subject between provider and producer—the masculine public face—and consumer, a feminine position that must be adopted awkwardly and with a sense of unease.

Strictly speaking, the association of class mobility and the automobile wasn't new to the *commedia all'italiana* of the 1950s and 60s: already in the 1932 Camerini film *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!*, we find that the entire film turns on the way that the protagonist's social status can be instantly apprehended in a glance. Bruno rides a bicycle, and this is enough to guarantee that the girl he admires, Mariuccia, will not consider him as a suitor—or so he believes. That bicycle-riding protagonist is played, once again, by De Sica, and he attempts to impress Mariuccia by

³⁴ Giacovelli, *La commedia all'italiana*, 109.

³⁵ Grande, *Abiti nuziali*, 80.

³⁶ Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, 77.

“borrowing” his employer’s luxury car while he claims it is being repaired, passing it off as his own and taking Mariuccia to the Lakes. (This enterprise is already fraught with sexual danger, since Mariuccia’s two girlfriends habitually “go to the Lakes” with the older, wealthy men who are presumed to be their sugar daddies.) When his employer finds him and the supposedly broken car at an inn, Bruno is forced to abandon Mariuccia and then loses his job after he wrecks the vehicle trying to go back and get her. A second stint as a driver to a wealthy gentleman ends no better, since Bruno cannot tolerate his boss’s sexual advances toward Mariuccia. The man’s means of livelihood is still tied to the automobile as both a promise and a menace—but a menace that never fully materializes. Camerini’s comedies generally work against the possibility of class mobility, and toward reconciling the male protagonists to their place (although they also, of course, depend on the temporary pleasure of transgression before that reconciliation takes place). *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* ends happily because Bruno learns to remain in his proper social station, an honest man: the film ends with him in his soon-to-be father-in-law’s taxi, a passenger rather than a driver. It is only the later comedies of *commedia all’italiana* that largely, although not exclusively, see modernity as inevitable, and something to be dreaded.

A Death Drive

De Vincenti’s claim is not simply that the *commedia all’italiana* of the 1950s and 60s envisioned a split male subject, always at odds with himself and his desires, but that the final destination of this hypocritical hero is—unconsciously, of course—death. Viewers familiar with the *commedia all’italiana* may already suspect that De Vincenti is thinking of one film in particular. Discussing *Il sorpasso*, Viganò notes that the film’s comedy often suggests a much darker, even fatal, direction: “la gioia di vivere [può trascorrere] nella pulsione della morte” (*joie de vivre* can run over into the death drive), and Lanzoni also notes some of the mortuary foreshadowing in the film.³⁷

The film is widely regarded as one of the best *commedie all’italiana*, and an excellent example of how easily the genre leant itself to social and historical critique—as well as an often intensely conservative attitude about modernity (especially changing gender roles). The film opens with a nervous, palpitating bebop jazz soundtrack as we watch a sporty convertible (a Lancia Aurelia B24) tear through the completely deserted streets of the Balduina neighborhood on the outskirts of Rome. The film largely centers on the personality of the driver, Bruno, by turns appealing (his simple enjoyment of unsophisticated pleasures) and repellent (he is, even by Italian standards of the day, racist and sexist, and delights in abrasive pranks like stopping for a hitchhiker and then speeding away). Bruno seems to have avoided De Vincenti’s split, hypocritical subjectivity by being a totally unreflective, flat subject, without depth of any kind, one completely dedicated to movement, regardless of where it may take him. Bruno picks up an unlikely (and initially rather unwilling) passenger, the young, timid, serious law student Roberto, whom Bruno treats as a protégé or younger brother. Again and again, the two return to the question of modernity. Bruno is appalled at the antiquity of the law that Roberto studies, and asks why he doesn’t study something modern, like “diritto spaziale” (space law). “Diritto spaziale?” (Space law?) asks Roberto incredulously. Bruno frames the vital legal questions of the future in space in terms of a car accident: “Certo. Due astronavi si scontrano: chi è che paga?”

³⁷ *Il sorpasso* (The Easy Life), dir. Dino Risi, 1962, Incei Film. Viganò, “La commedia all’italiana,” 248. Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style*, 91.

(Sure. Like, two spaceships crash into each other—who pays?). Bruno does not limit his critique to literal forms of modern mobility, but also shifting sexual norms. When the two talk about Roberto's love life—he is sweet on the girl next door, but too timid to talk to her, and wants to finish studying before he gets serious with a girl—Bruno is appalled by his talk of “getting serious.” He suggests that Roberto should take her out on a date and then go to bed with her. “Mica siamo nel Medioevo!” (We're hardly in the Middle Ages!). Bruno's daughter is the most modern of all: she is sexually uninhibited, drinks Pepsi, calls her parents by their first names, and is a dedicated career girl who is engaged to a man some four decades her senior who promises her a Harvard degree in public relations and a managerial position in a chemical research division.

Mobility is no longer in question in this film—it is a fact of life, not a precarious possibility that needs to be secured. One can move, and move freely. Bruno and Roberto go where they like, stop when they like, change directions and destinations from moment to moment. Not only does everyone have a car, but there are now well-maintained roads, gas stations, roadside restaurants, motels and hotels—in short, there is the entire infrastructure that supports the mobile, nomadic, even monadic life that typifies the experience of modernity after the war. Socio-economic mobility is explicitly tied to this freedom of movement, as symbolized by the car and the yacht. Roberto's lisping, fascist cousin, Alfredo, praises Roberto for having chosen to study law, his own field, and suggests that Roberto will follow in his prosperous footsteps, which will ultimately lead to a trophy wife and a Fiat 1500—these are the images of movement and mobility in Italian modernity, and there's no question that the film's images of movement are glamorous and enticing.

But here, as elsewhere in the *commedia all'italiana*, the impulse toward modernization is fundamentally fraught and riddled with anxiety. You may have modernity, including the socio-economic and literal mobility that it allows, but only at a price, and the price is ultimately bigger than the split, hypocritical subject that De Vincenti describes (although that, too, is at stake—Roberto loathes the thought of ending up like his cousin). This essentially conservative understanding of modernity finds its concrete form in the title: *Il sorpasso*. To pass someone is implicitly an aggressive act, to move more than is strictly necessary, to overtake those who are ahead of you. After some frustration in one sequence, Bruno eventually manages to pass two men in a Fiat 600 who attempt to block him. When they find him later and confront him at a restaurant and night club, he points out that there's no sign saying it's forbidden to pass, but a brawl erupts anyway, a brawl that spoils Bruno's prospects, both professional (with an influential man at the club) and sexual (with the same man's wife). “Passing” is not simply mobility, but excessive mobility that must be punished. The law prohibiting this excessive mobility may not be written, but the *commedia all'italiana* embodies it all the same. The moving images of the Italian comedy were at least as invested in immobilizing the subject as they were in presenting images of his (and it is almost always a male subject whose mobility is at stake) glamorous and exciting newfound mobility. Not infrequently, then, these moving images become literalized images of immobility, with the protagonists arrested or worse.

Ultimately, Bruno and Roberto's drive is really a death drive.³⁸ *Il sorpasso* is indeed a strangely mortuary film: the empty Roman streets during Ferragosto in the opening credits look

³⁸ This pun works, of course, only in English, but it is worth keeping in mind the “driven” quality of *pulsione* in Italian, too, suggesting an irresistible force that pushes you forward. The mechanical, puppet-like character of the

like the deserted cityscapes of a post-apocalyptic film; a group of German priests (the same ones from *Ladri di biciclette?*) who have a flat have to ask for a jack in a dead language, Latin; a truck has spilled refrigerators all over the road, and the driver holds his bloodied face in his hands; Bruno refers to the country villa of Roberto's relatives as a morgue. On more than one occasion, what looks like a romantic or erotic prospect turns out to be strangely mortuary: two flirtatious, blonde German tourists in another convertible that Bruno and Roberto follow (fig. 7) lead them unexpectedly to a cemetery (fig. 8), and Bruno's daughter jokingly refers to Roberto as "giovane Werther" (young Werther), a would-be lover with a gloomy, intellectual demeanor, but also prefiguring his death (and obliquely suggesting that his psyche is in some way oriented towards death).³⁹



drive appears most clearly in the titles of *I motorizzati* and *Le motorizzate*, where formerly human subjects are "motorized," "driven," and "automated," so to speak; their cars drive them rather than the reverse.

³⁹ She is obliquely referring to the nascent attraction between the two of them, impossible because she is already engaged to an older man, roughly paralleling Lotte and Albert in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (well known in Italy through Ugo Foscolo's version of it, *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*), although her fiancé is much older than Albert is in that novel.



Figs. 7 and 8. From “come hither” to the cemetery. *Il sorpasso*, 1962, Incei Film.

Roberto eventually learns to emulate Bruno’s *carpe diem* and *carpe viam* attitude, finally calling the girl he loves from afar on the phone, spurring Bruno to greater speed, and screaming at the “sedentari” (slowpokes) that they pass. His desire to move ahead and embrace a more modern form of sexual desire (he will no longer wait until he has finished school and found a job before “getting serious”) is indeed “un sorpasso,” a moving ahead and around of an obstacle. Here I must disagree with the optimistic equation offered by Fullwood in *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*: throughout her chapter on the car in *commedia all’italiana*, she equates the mobility of the car with social mobility, leading her to conclude that being passed on the road “is an acknowledgement of social inferiority,” and so “speed becomes a metaphor for ... success.”⁴⁰ That optimism about the car is reflected in the chapter’s title, “Driving Passions.” But *Il sorpasso*, like *I motorizzati* and *Le motorizzate* (and really, the other comedies I’ve discussed here), is fundamentally a cautionary tale *in the other direction*—the anxiety is not about the consequences of being overtaken, but of moving ahead too fast, moving out of turn. As Quaglietti notes, it is hard not to see in *Il sorpasso*’s final car crash “l’oscuro avvenire di una classe lasciata trascinarsi dall’avventura” (the hazy future of a class that has let itself be led astray by adventure).⁴¹ One should not ignore a certain ambiguity in the ending of the film, of course. It is the vulgar and consumerist “new Italian” rather than the one rooted in the past who survives, but the loss of a dignified Italian identity, connected to a historical past, is presented as a loss, and indeed, as a loss that looks likely to scar and trouble that modern Italian (Bruno).

⁴⁰ Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, 160.

⁴¹ Lorenzo Quaglietti, “Le ‘vere’ e le ‘false’ commedie all’italiana,” in *Commedia all’italiana: angolazioni controcampi*, ed. Riccardo Napolitano (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 1986), 71.

The precarious mobility of *Peccato che sia una canaglia* can end in marriage, part of the optimism of a 1950s recovery from the war and in opposition to the static and even negative mobility depicted in neorealism (although marriage, too, is a form of symbolic immobility). In the 1962 *Il sorpasso*, however, it was clear that modernity's mobility was here to stay, and was to be understood as a source of anxiety, even dread. By the end of the decade, however, a film like *Il medico della mutua* could *begin* with an ambulance being sent for the main character, almost dead from his frantic attempts to move forward into a new era of economic opportunity.⁴² As Giacobelli notes, the automobile as symbol is increasingly “collegata all’idea di immobilità, di distruzione, di morte” (tied to the idea of immobility, destruction, death).⁴³

Speaking very broadly, that aura of anxiety and dread would turn into a resignation, even a nostalgia in the cinema of the 1970s. The 1974 comedy *C'eravamo tanto amati* (We All Loved Each Other So Much) highlights the extremity of progress that modernity can bring.⁴⁴ Although it is an ensemble film, in many ways it focuses on Gianni (Vittorio Gassman), who begins the film as a politically engaged partisan in World War II, in love with an admirable woman, Luciana, but who eventually becomes a wealthy member of the bourgeoisie with right-wing political connections and a meaningless marriage. (It is worth noting that Gianni's romantic bicycle rides with Luciana are interrupted when he stops to admire the power and speed of an expensive car in the street; the car will turn out to belong to a corrupt businessman who will become his father-in-law.) The film is characterized by a peculiar formal device that appears to speak quite directly to the question of the moving image. Even in the opening credits, the film “stutters,” repeating abruptly the same sequence again and again, eventually leading to a shot of the older, wealthy Gianni leaping off a diving board into his pool. The film freezes on Gianni mid-dive, however, before going back in time to examine how the image of frozen movement was produced by the movements of history, particularly the movement from the neorealist stories of the 1940s (these sequences are filmed in black and white, and concentrate on the poverty of the main characters) to the comedy of the present era (shot in color, and largely about the class differences between the main characters). Throughout the film, however, the actors and the action will occasionally freeze (as in a theatrical production, the actors simply hold still, but the camera continues running), allowing a voice-over to comment.

In his influential work on time in cinema, Deleuze isolates a certain moment in film history in which a new kind of image emerged that he called a “purely optical situation” or a “time image.”⁴⁵ These are images to which characters and the viewer alike do not know how to react, allowing the emergence of a space of pure contemplation. For Deleuze, these are not moments of “dead time”—they are moments instead in which time itself flows out of the image, time becomes the substance of the film. He relates the time image directly to the question of movement, and indeed, the movement from neorealism to later Italian film; he quotes Antonioni explaining that *Il grido* is essentially *Bicycle Thief* without the bicycle.⁴⁶ Although the *commedia all'italiana* continually plays with the opposition between the image of movement (the car in motion) and the image of stasis (the car jam, the wrecked car at the base of the cliff in *Il*

⁴² *Il medico della mutua* (Be Sick ... It's Free), dir. Luigi Zampa, 1968, Euro Film.

⁴³ Giacobelli, *La commedia all'italiana*, 110.

⁴⁴ *C'eravamo tanto amati* (We All Loved Each Other So Much), dir. Ettore Scola, 1974, La Deantir.

⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 2, 23.

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 23.

sorpasso), the viewer always knows precisely how to react in front of these images: a recognition of the perils of modernity, however inevitable they be. The sequences of “held time” in *C'eravamo tanto amanti* are a case in point: although the suspended image would appear to allow an extended contemplation of the meaning of the image, the voice-over and the generally didactic structure of the film guarantee that the viewer is never at risk of thinking for very long, and that the essential rejection of modernity (as well as its inevitability) is never in doubt. This is not a critique of *commedia all'italiana* for being, say, insufficiently contemplative or overly didactic—but simply to demonstrate its generic investment in articulating its anxiety about the speed of modernity.

This is true even when the film uses more conventional editing techniques. In one sequence, we watch Gianni's family leave the house: the distraught wife in her sports car, the indifferent husband in his luxury car, the son on his motor scooter, the daughter on her bicycle. The viewer is left to contemplate for a few moments the empty garage after the family has left. Far from this being an Antonionian contemplation of pure absence, the viewer immediately understands that it is an image of the atomism and emptiness of modern life, the evacuation of the nuclear family. If the lesson were not clear enough, it is followed directly by a smash cut to a junkyard as evening falls. The husband finds the wife's wrecked vehicle piled high atop all the rest of the psychic and literal wreckage provoked by the economic boom. He converses briefly with her ghost, his fantasy of her. “Did you get my message?” she asks, from beyond the grave. “No, I came for the insurance,” he replies cheerfully before turning away. He is entirely comfortable, relaxed, indifferent. Gianni may be a hypocrite, but this position is no longer marked in many later Italian comedies, which no longer feel like *commedie all'italiana*, precisely because they lack the fraught anxiety and even anguish of those earlier films. Masolino D'Amico refers to *C'eravamo tanto amanti* as an eloquent demonstration of the “incapacità di cambiare la vita” (inability to change one's life), suggesting that these later films are not so much about images of motion as they are about a now static and unchanging new way of life.⁴⁷ Gianni's dead wife tries to get him to admit to having regrets, but he honestly cannot think of any. *C'eravamo tanto amanti* ends with Gianni—who has remained suspended in the air in a freeze frame since the film's opening shot—finishing his dive into the pool, oblivious as his former friends walk away. We should understand the essential motionlessness of this moving image, however—in particular, the lack of emotion in Gianni, an essential numbness that seems to be the final price to be paid for the movement into modernity.

Conclusion

I have tried here to explore the many “moving images”—understood here as images of movement and especially images of mobility—in *commedia all'italiana*. Previous scholarship, from Grande to Fullwood, has recognized the particular importance of the automobile for these films, in which the car seems to represent the glamor and appeal of a modern life. Crucially for an Italian context, the modernity implied by the automobile is a modernity of liberated desire, both consumerist and sexual, as well as the potential for a socio-economic mobility—in a few cases (such as *Il sorpasso*), it may even suggest a national mobility, in which Italy can join the ranks of modern European countries, rather than remaining always turned toward its historical

⁴⁷ Masolino d'Amico, *La commedia all'italiana: il cinema comico in Italia dal 1945 al 1975* (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), 203.

past. All of this helps explain what appears to be a particular love affair between the filmic genre and the automobile; indeed, the automobile appears as a regular character in the genre, at times (as in *I motorizzati*) its organizing principle or even protagonist.

The high value placed on the presence of the car in *commedia all'italiana* in the scholarship, however, has perhaps obscured the more general presence of a diverse range of “moving images” in the *commedia*, including Vespas, buses, trolleys, bicycles, boats, trains, planes, spaceships, and even an elephant, each of which is charged with a particular value for “the modern” (very low in the case of the elephant, much higher for the car or the airplane). In this essay, I’ve attempted to show how all of these images of movement are responding to a profound *lack* of movement in many films of Italian neorealism, which generally preferred images of failed mobility, from Antonio Ricci’s lost bicycle or the collapsing staircase in *Roma ore undici* to Umberto D’s attempted suicide on the tram tracks. No one owns a car in a neorealist film. From this historical perspective (which should really reach back into the comedies of the 1930s as well), the modern luster and appeal of the automobile must have looked all the more appealing, and indeed Fullwood argues that the car, particularly its speed, is a marker of success, both economic and sexual, with different levels of velocity corresponding to “differing levels of success.”⁴⁸

Fullwood does not ignore the negative aspects to the automobile, but most of her discussion of them is devoted to the traffic jam, and overall, she emphasizes the affect of joy and the celebration of luxurious modernity and sensual success.⁴⁹ My aim here has been to suggest that the “moving images” of the *commedia all'italiana* do move us as spectators, but they elicit a more complex range of emotions. The automobile may be associated, for example, with sexual success, but one cannot help but notice that Fullwood’s examples of this, the Gassman episode in *Se permettete parliamo di donne* and *Una vita difficile*, are that of a man failing to have sex despite (or more precisely, because of) his car’s reclining seats, and a husband being betrayed by a wife who leaves in her lover’s car.⁵⁰ Speed may equal success, but it seems to me that more often than not in the *commedia all'italiana*, it equals *someone else’s success* (not least because success *per se* is not funny; humiliation, however, often is). There is something of the “cautionary tale,” a kind of didactic impulse, in all this. The moving images of the Italian comedy ultimately seem more likely to move the viewer toward a fraught state poised between the seductions of modernity and an anxious, fearful recoiling from that same modernity.⁵¹ I should be clear that this isn’t the same thing as Gorgolini’s “conservative modernization,” which suggests a slow approach to modernity, or an approach that attempts to preserve, say, aspects of traditional gender roles. It is perhaps something more like the fretful agitation one experiences before going to the dentist for a root canal: the work will have to be done, but the knowledge of its inevitability does little to relieve your angst.

⁴⁸ Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, 160, but see 158–160 more broadly.

⁴⁹ See Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, 160, but see 139–42 for her discussion of the traffic jam.

⁵⁰ *Se permettete parliamo di donne* (Let’s Talk About Women), dir. Ettore Scola, 1964, Concordia Compagnia Cinematografica. *Una vita difficile* (A Difficult Life), dir. Dino Risi, 1961, Dino de Laurentiis Cinematografica.

⁵¹ It is worth noting that Italian cinema is not alone in its fraught, ambiguous, and anxious depiction of the automobile and the “automobility” (Mills) it brings. See, for example, Mark Osteen, “Noir’s Cars: Automobility and Amoral Space in American Film Noir,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 35/4 (2008): 183–192. Osteen notes that in American film noir, cars function as “amoral spaces” that are also “overdetermined symbols of characters’ aspirations and disappointments” (184), concluding that—as I argued of neorealism here—in noir, the car is “a flywheel leading nowhere” (185).

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