

***Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960): Patterns of Labor, Space and Integration**

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Following the death of their father, the Parondi family migrates from the southern region of Lucania (Basilicata) to the prosperous northern city of Milan, where the eldest son Vincenzo already lives. Luchino Visconti's film *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960) is articulated in five parts – each named after one of the family's brothers – tracing the struggles of adaptation to a new context, where there are opportunities for economic gain and social integration, but also temptations and threats in a modern city that drives the group's members apart. The film is inspired by some tales and characters from Giovanni Testori's collection of short stories *Il ponte della Ghisolfa* (*Ghisolfa Bridge*), published in 1958.

Rocco e i suoi fratelli was the major hit at the Italian box office in 1960– 1961. Around 75% of its earnings came from peripheral and provincial theaters, attended mainly by working- class audiences.¹ A group of factory workers interviewed after a screening affirmed that their favorite character was the hardworking and pragmatic middle brother, *Ciro*.² This is not surprising: *Ciro* is a factory worker himself, and he is the Parondi family member who best exemplifies a trajectory of successful integration to the city of Milan.³ Such an experience was very close to the aspirations of many southern migrants, and therefore the character delineates a wide, collective process of identity formation. Nevertheless, Visconti paints *Ciro* with mixed and contrasting tones that only partially overlap with the two prevailing hegemonic contemporary discourses about progress: modernity and integration. On the one hand, there was an emphasis on the conflicts generated by internal migration, focusing on aspects like housing, unemployment and the cultural clash between 'locals' and migrants and with special attention to the supposed 'backwardness' of the South.⁴ Such concerns – all present in Visconti's film – were related to concrete social issues, which were perceived as the by- products of modern capitalism.⁵ On the other hand, there was the triumphalist image of progress disseminated by the Italian government and entrepreneurs through newsreels, documentaries and illustrated magazines.⁶

Visconti's choice of Milan as a shooting location and the film's treatment of urban space are intertwined with such images, and they strongly influence the ways in which labor is represented. As John Foot has noted, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* is exceptional in its choice to portray Milan, the capital of Italy's economic boom, almost exclusively through the peripheries and margins.⁷ In the film's opening, several episodes foreshadow the process of integration and highlight the movement of transition – from the outside to the inside – that the Parondi family will face. For instance, either through an editing cut or a camera movement, emphasis is put on a physical barrier that separates the interior and the exterior of a space that the characters will traverse. The first two shots of the film, after the titles end, show the tracks of Milan's central station: in these two shots the perspectives are similar, but the first one is blocked by the vertical bars of a gate, while the second

one is taken from the other side of that same gate. Shortly after, when Vincenzo asks for shelter at the Vecchi brothers' construction company, the camera positions itself outside, then climbs over the fence with an elaborate (and narratively 'superfluous') dolly shot. The Parondi family's arrival to their first apartment is shot in a similar way: the movement of the gate, which opens from the inside, is highlighted by the camera, which follows the family's slow walk through their courtyard, carrying their belongings on a cart under the othering gaze of various tenants, who exchange racist comments and laugh with scorn.

This peculiar treatment of urban space works via a multilayered use of the existing city imagery by privileging transitions and passages, but also by strategically avoiding Milan's most renowned symbols of capitalism. Indeed, there are very few clear references to the iconography of the economic boom. The first can be found in the tram journey that takes the family from the station to Vincenzo's apartment: here the lights of the shop windows symbolize the irresistible lure of commodities: "lo spettacolo delle merci che inebria, stordisce e acceca" (the inebriating, dizzying and blinding spectacle)⁸ that will contribute to the 'corruption' of traditional family values.⁹ Another is the brief sequence set in front of the Standa department store, where Vincenzo is waiting to meet Ginetta. As the first department store chain in Italy, Standa was an icon of mass consumerism, but in Visconti's film it merely functions as a site for a quick and 'forbidden' meeting between two lovers. A third moment linked to the iconography of the boom – and also the most important one for our purposes, as it is the only one explicitly tied to the representation of industrial labor – portrays Ciriaco in the Alfa Romeo car factory where he is employed.

This is the only time we see Ciriaco in his professional context, in a tracking shot that lasts no more than five seconds: the camera approaches him as he stands at the assembly line, between two other workers, fastening a bolt to an engine all while engaged in conversation (we cannot hear his words; see Figure 11). It is important to underline that the shot in question constitutes an anomaly with respect to the film's visual style and narrative: these images are evoked through the mother Rosaria's voiceover, as Rocco reads her letter, sent to update him on various family matters.¹⁰ The factory shot is exceptional for several other reasons: it is the only part of the letter that is visually 'translated,' the only instance of nonchronological editing and the only shot without synchronous sound. Moreover, in contrast to the general underplay of locations and symbols typically associated with 'progress' and 'modernity,' this shot is also the only part of the film perfectly compliant with the established iconography of the economic boom, and especially with the epic of labor celebrated by corporate and governmental media outlets.

In fact, at the time of the film's release, even a fleeting image of factory work would have been sufficient to recall the larger repertoire of visual culture associated with industrial labor. In particular, the assembly line, where the worker employs sophisticated robots to build new models of Italian-designed cars, became a symbol of the advent of modern capitalism. As such, Ciriaco, the integrated factory worker, embodies aspects of both economic boom narratives: one that warned against negative social effects, and one that celebrated promises of wealth.

The eccentricity of this shot confirms the film's complex and conflicting position with respect to modernization and integration. As Veronica Pravadelli has rightly noted, "Visconti seems to favor the transformation of the southern peasantry into the proletarian class of the northern industrial society,"¹¹ but at the same time, many crucial aspects of *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* reveal a feeling of 'cultural apocalypse' similar to that found in the writings of Pier Paolo Pasolini and the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino.¹² As a specialized factory worker engaged to the daughter of a local entrepreneur, Ciriaco is destined to join the middle class and take part in the most profound experience of social mobility in postwar Italy. Nevertheless, this particular experience is only

secondary to the film's plot, which uses the melodramatic mode to prioritize the sense of loss and displacement felt by Rocco and Simone.¹³ Conversely, Ciro's steps towards integration are placed in the realm of normalcy and everydayness, as when he is shown bowed over his desk, where he studies to obtain his diploma, or when his brothers comment sharply on his graduation.

If Ciro's hard work, determination and sacrifice do not fit the melodramatic frame of Visconti's film, his real centrality emerges when he reveals, in a farewell dialogue with the younger brother Luca, his strong feelings for the Lucania region. This conversation takes place after Ciro has already left the family house and interrupted any viable relationship with the group. Ciro represents the eradicated subaltern subject – his choice of integration ends up costing him the affective ties of family life and the chance to return to the South. But despite all this, Ciro still believes in the righteousness of his decision and in the positive effects of progress on his people.¹⁴ He envisions that someday southerners too will understand the necessity of progress and modernity, and at that point he believes that his younger brother Luca will have a chance to return 'home.'¹⁵

Therefore, in order to fully grasp the implications of Ciro's trajectory, it is necessary to juxtapose it – as the film itself demands – with the full "spectrum of available ways of dealing with integration" embodied by the other brothers.¹⁶ Along these lines, we could also argue that, in order to deconstruct the film's portrayal of industrial labor through the character of Ciro, we should juxtapose it with the other kinds of labor and the respective characters that embody them. In particular, the film articulates different kinds of labor through the eroticized bodies of Nadia, Rocco and Simone, as well as through the multiple gazes that they attract. These three characters are involved in an ill-fated love triangle that fuels the plot's tragic component. But Rocco and Simone also make up (together with the manager Morini) another tragic triangle, propelled by the illusion of easy social mobility and professional success through the sport of boxing.¹⁷ These two triangles are sometimes marked in the film by episodes of 'excess' in the *mise-en-scène* (in typical melodramatic fashion): a combination of close-ups or extreme close-ups, showing an insistent gaze that eroticizes the bodies of the protagonists. This form of stylistic punctuation occurs when erotic desire overlaps with the impulse to confine a given body to its 'professional' identity.

Let us briefly illustrate three such moments. The first occurs in the sequence that foreshadows the tragic love triangle, when Nadia is introduced to the Parondi family through a chance encounter (see Figure 12). She purposely exhibits her eroticized body for the eyes of the brothers, while the editing anticipates this visuality with a double close-up of Rocco and Simone. It is here that, observing the photograph of Vincenzo as a boxer, Nadia instils in the brothers the idea of easy money through a fighting career. A second sequence takes place in the shower, following Simone and Rocco's first training session. Morini emerges out of the dark to stare at the boys' naked bodies with a gaze that replicates the spectator's own (in a prolonged shot that highlights the spectacle of the brothers' nude torsos). Morini nods with satisfaction: a gesture that refers ambiguously to his anticipation of 'professional' success (he realizes that Simone has what it takes to become a professional boxer), but also to the beginning of his erotic seduction.¹⁸ In a third sequence, that of Nadia's rape, Simone invokes Rocco's gaze toward the victim and forces him to see her as a prostitute: "He must see who you are" Simone yells, as he brutally assaults Nadia under Rocco's and the audience's eyes.

The 'ideological work' on labor in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* can thus be found in the formal and narrative slippage between, on the one hand, male homosexual desire or the love for a prostitute and, on the other hand, the exploitation of physical labor. This is achieved through the "constant parallels the film draws between prostitution and boxing" as different but ultimately akin forms of "exploitation of the body of poorer classes by the richer as a form of social sacrifice."¹⁹ Both forms of labor involve the spectacle of the body eroticized through class difference, and they also carry with them

representational generic codes.²⁰ The conversion of a 'desired' subject into an 'exploited' one also highlights the interchangeability of the commodified body: in the Rocco- Simone- Nadia triangle, the woman is exchanged by the two men, whereas in the Morini- Rocco- Simone triangle, one boxer is replaced by another.

Nadia provides the most explicit commentary on this slippage, she being arguably the only character capable of demonstrating a higher awareness of the conditions of her exploitation. Nadia tells Simone: "If I understood correctly, you do boxing like I do life." Conversely, Simone seems completely oblivious to the ways in which he has fallen prey to a system designed "to exploit misery in the form of a spectacle."²¹

Unlike *Ciro's* factory labor, which produces a successful integration, the work of these marginalized bodies does not allow them to transcend their condition of subalternity: Nadia remains trapped in the patriarchal dichotomy of wife and prostitute, Simone's aspirations of social mobility are tragically thwarted and even if Rocco's trajectory seems more successful (he joins the national boxing team), he remains alien to the forms of consumption and lifestyle that distinguish 'modern' Italian masculinity during the economic boom.²² Several critics have identified this as a potential weakness of the film's declared political intent: Brendan Hennessey, for example, writes that the "brothers and their love interest pressed representations of factory work and workers to the film's margins."²³ Nevertheless, the film's reception at the time of its release, as well as the legacy of *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* as an epitome of life during the economic boom, seem to contradict such concerns. As we argued, Visconti's emphasis on the visual and narrative melodrama is not detrimental to the role of *Ciro*; on the contrary, it is only against the backdrop of these failed integrational trajectories that the symbolic value of *Ciro's* industrial labor comes into full relief. Moreover, the film's specificity lies in its ability to fully evoke and intercept, even in the apparent 'marginality' with which it represents factory work, the real centrality of labor as a social experience and the conflicting discourses and images of progress and modernity circulating in Italy at the time.

Notes

1 Spinazzola, V. 1985. *Cinema e pubblico: Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945– 1965*. Rome: Bulzoni. 255.

2 Pravadelli, V. 2006. “Visconti’s ‘Rocco and His Brothers’: Identity, Melodrama, and the National-Popular.” *Annali d’Italianistica*, vol. 24. 241.

3 For a recent critical study of the scholarship on ‘integration,’ with a specific focus on Milan, see: Foot, J. 2001. *Milan Since the Miracle: City, Culture, and Identity*. Oxford: Berg.

4 It is interesting to note that in 1960 – the year of *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*’s release – two influential texts about the social and cultural issues of integration also appeared: Luciano Bianciardi’s essay-novel *L’integrazione* (The Integration) and the sociologist Francesco Alberoni’s *Contributo allo studio dell’integrazione sociale dell’immigrato* (Contribution to the study of the migrant’s social integration).

5 That the boom years represent a missed opportunity for fixing some of Italy’s structural problems is emblematically expressed in: Crainz, G. 2003. *Il paese mancato. Dal miracolo economico agli anni Ottanta*. Rome: Donzelli.

6 There are very good examples of this iconography in many Settimana Incom government newsreels, such as “Italia in cammino” (Italy On The March, 1958) and “L’industrializzazione italiana nelle parole di illustri industriali ed imprenditori” (Italian Industrialization in the Words of Illustrious Entrepreneurs, 1961), both available online at: <[https:// www.archivioluce.com](https://www.archivioluce.com)>

7 Foot, J. 1999. “Cinema and the City: Milan and Luchino Visconti’s Rocco and His Brothers (1960).” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2. 209– 235.

8 Canova, G. 2000. “*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*: Visconti e le aporie anestetiche della modernità.” *Il cinema di Luchino Visconti*. Edited by Veronica Pravadelli. Rome: Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinema. 182.

9 As Mauro Giori notes, in order to achieve this effect, the geography of the city was altered: whereas the tram is supposed to connect the central station to Lambrate, the scene was actually shot in the very central via Manzoni. Giori, M. 2011. *Luchino Visconti. Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. Turin: Lindau.

10 Rosaria’s narration also emphasizes the link between education and Ciro’s role as a skilled worker: “He has been hired at Alfa Romeo now that he got his diploma from night school.”

11 Pravadelli, V. 2006. “Visconti’s ‘Rocco and His Brothers.’ ” 239.

12 Giuliani, G. 2018. *Nation and Gender in Modern Italy: Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 124.

13 On the application of theories of melodrama to Visconti’s film, see: Pravadelli, V. 2006. “Visconti’s ‘Rocco and His Brothers.’ ” Bayman, L. 2014. *The Operatic and the Everyday in Postwar Italian Film Melodrama*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

14 Taking a cue from Visconti’s own statements, many scholars have established parallels between this speech and Antonio Gramsci’s call for an alliance between northern workers and southern peasants in the struggle to overcome the Southern Question (the North- South divide). For an

overview of these interventions, see: Rohdie, S. 1992. *Rocco and His Brothers*. London: British Film Institute.

15 Though this might be seen as pointing to a circular understanding of time and history, Veronica Pravadelli argues that “the absence of the prologue [...] undo[es] the relationships with the ending,” thus undermining the circular trajectory and the melodramatic structure. Therefore, “the narrative structure of the film supports integration.” Pravadelli, V. 2006. “Visconti’s ‘Rocco and His Brothers.’ ” 238– 239.

16 Pravadelli, V. 2006. “Visconti’s ‘Rocco and His Brothers.’ ” 236.

17 The film highlights the parallels between these two tragic triangles by crosscutting, especially in the famous climatic sequence that juxtaposes Simone’s murder of Nadia with Rocco’s boxing match. For a recent analysis of this key scene, see: Bayman, L. 2014. *The Operatic and the Everyday in Postwar Italian Film Melodrama 168–171*.

18 For a close reading of this sequence, see: Bolongaro, E. 2010. “Representing the Un(re)presentable: Homosexuality in Luchino Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers*.” *Studies in European Cinema*, vol. 7, no. 3. 221– 234.

19 Hipkins, D. 2006. “‘I Don’t Want to Die’: Prostitution and Narrative Disruption in Visconti’s *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*.” *Women in Italy, 1945– 1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave. 200.

20 On *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*’s engagement with – but also challenge to – the trope of the female prostitute in postwar Italian cinema, see: Hipkins, D. 2006. “‘I Don’t Want to Die.’” For a contextualization of the film within the boxing genre, which suggests situating its representation of exploited physical labor and ‘othered’ bodies (in terms of class and ethnicity) within an international canon, see: Hennessey, B. 2016. “Patterns of Pugilism: *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960) and the Boxing Film.” *The Italianist*, vol. 36, no. 2. 214– 242.

21 Giori, M. 2011. *Luchino Visconti*. 204.

22 Bellasai, S. 2003. “Mascolinità, mutamento, merce. Crisi dell’identità maschile nell’Italia del boom.” *Genere, generazione e consume. L’Italia degli anni Sessanta*. Edited by Paolo Capuzzo. Rome: Carocci. 105– 137.

23 Hennessey, B. 2016. “Patterns of Pugilism.” 221. Ruth Ben- Ghiat makes a similar argument, remarking that Visconti’s film “draw[s] in viewers with an emphasis on sexuality and spectacle that undercuts and threatens to overwhelm didactic messages about the virtues of honest labor and class solidarity.” Ben- Ghiat, R. 2001. “The Italian Cinema and the Italian Working Class.” *International Labor and Working- Class History*, no. 59. 37.