

Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies

Volume 11 Number 1

© 2023 Intellect Ltd Book Review. English language.

https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms_00169_5

ITALIAN INDUSTRIAL LITERATURE AND FILM: PERSPECTIVES ON THE REPRESENTATION OF POSTWAR LABOR, CARLO BAGHETTI, JIM CARTER AND LORENZO MARMO (EDS) (2021)

Oxford: Peter Lang, 546 pp.,

ISBN 978-1-78874-598-7, p/bk, €33.06

Reviewed by Monica Jansen, Utrecht University

This essay collection, from the successful Italian Modernities book series, is the second volume in the section ‘Panoramas’. Belonging to the categories of ‘panoramas’ and ‘modernities’, this volume follows Giancarlo Lombardi and Christian Uva’s edited volume on *Political Cinema* (2016) and situates the topic of Italian industrial literature and film within the complex field of Italy’s plural modernities; these could then be subdivided into the semantic fields of modernization, modernism and modernity, as is suggested in Veronica Pravadelli’s essay on Ermanno Olmi (402–03).

Bringing the representations of post-war labour in literature and film together in a single volume has an advantage of illustrating both how these two cultural media represent the same economic and technological evolutions and how their narratives are conditioned by media-specific modalities. The essays in this volume also discuss various examples of intermediality, such as novels that have been adapted to cinema (Bianciardi’s *La vita agra* [*It’s a Hard Life*] [1962]; Mastronardi’s *Il maestro di Vigevano* [*The Teacher from Vigevano*] [1962]; Bevilacqua’s *La califfa* [*Lady Caliph*] [1972]). This combination of literature and film results in a fruitful conversation between the contributions, which are ordered as Part I: ‘History, Method, Legacy’ (25–235), Part II: ‘Italian Industrial Literature’ (239–357) and Part III: ‘Italian Industrial Film’ (361–489).

The volume also offers a productive dialogue between Italian and Anglo-American scholars, whose languages are brought into contact through the excellent translations by Jim Carter, Patrick Waldron and Lorenzo Marmo. As the editors state in their introduction, their greatest challenge was ‘to compose a collection that speaks to multiple audiences, and in a way that is not too complex for some and not too generic for others’ (4). The format of this handbook – in which each essay is of a similar structure and length and discusses a methodological perspective and/or a close reading of the cultural products under its scrutiny – is ideal for three envisioned readerships: scholars of Italian industrial literature and film, scholars of twentieth-century Italy and other disciplines, and finally, students and general readers (4). The cohesive structure of the volume is certainly one of its major strengths, and it also contains a ‘Tentative Canon’ of Italian industrial literature and film (491–96) and an index of names and topics (529–46), which favours its practical use as a manual.

In their ‘Brief introduction’, the editors flesh out a double trajectory of Italy’s economic miracle that links Fellini’s *dolce vita* to Bianciardi’s *vita agra*.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Universiteit Utrecht (utrecht.nl)

IP: 131.211.12.11

On: Fri, 10 Feb 2023 12:16:43

They conclude their introduction by stating that 'Italian industrial literature and film was often aware of its problematic distance from working-class life and always determined to engage with it' (21). To illustrate this apparent contradiction, they trace the 'genealogies' of Italian industrial literature and film and show how the topic of industrial labour became central in the nineteenth century, developing from textbooks for workers on how to behave – the so-called 'letteratura per operai' – to 1930s social realist novels, which fell under Fascism censorship, and, in parallel, from the pioneering images of Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895) to those of industry crafted by sponsored films, with which 1960s and 1970s art cinema established an intertextual relationship.

The critical approaches contained in Part I offer a historical and methodological roadmap for the entire volume while also addressing those trends and topics that do not strictly fit between the time limits of the 1950s and 1970s boundary. The selected period coincides with the years of the economic boom and the crisis of Italy's industry and is identified with the factory of Fordist industrialism. This open framework explains why Carlo Baghetti's contribution on contemporary examples of post-industrial literature and Malvina Giordana's research on the precarious subject in twenty-first-century Italian film are considered as being part of the cultural 'legacies' of the representation of post-war labour.

Crucial to the debate on the relation between culture and industry are the metamorphoses of the concepts of 'alienation', 'class struggle' and 'crisis' in philosophical thought, from Marx and Gramsci to Negri and Agamben (examined by Sergio Ferrarese and Andrea Sartori), and the reflections on industrial literature as formulated by Elio Vittorini and Gianni Scalia in the famous 1961 issue of *Il Menabò* (analysed by Jim Carter).

From these essays it becomes clear how the writers and film directors studied in this volume worked simultaneously inside and outside the worlds of industry, the cultural industry not having a completely independent status. Paola Bonifazio shows how the history of sponsored filmmaking 'has important theoretical implications, *vis-à-vis* our understanding of film as an industry, an art and an educational tool' (75). Similarly, the essays by Emanuele Zinato and Alessandra Diazzi demonstrate how enlightened industrials such as Adriano Olivetti used culture and psychology to humanize the industry and enhance industrial production. Claudio Panella shows how the ambivalent relationship between culture and industry was already present in Italian literature and film before neorealism, navigating between Fascist cultural paternalism and a denunciation of 'exhausting routines, workplace accidents, strikes and layoffs' (29).

The essays also offer useful tools to focus on specific topics related to industry, such as woman labour and/in the factory (Ambra Zorat), the factory vs. nature and ecology (Piergiorgio Mori and Paolo Chirumbolo), and to how the issue of alienation connects with those of workers' displacement and embodied working experience (Lorenzo Marmo).

In Part II, the essays about Italian industrial literature approach the 'good life fantasy' of work from its dystopic, disturbing outcomes. The narrators of the stories differ from working-class writers such as Luigi Davì (Ugo Fracassa) and Tommaso di Ciaula (Erica Bellia) to those writers-intellectuals who are employed by the industries they take as the object of their fictional critiques: Ottiero Ottieri, discussed by Fabrizio di Maio; Giancarlo Buzzi, discussed by Silvia Cavalli; and Paolo Volponi, by Daniele Fioretti, all belonged to the

Olivetti-circle. Luciano Bianciardi works for the cultural industry, which he criticizes and simultaneously uses to attack Milan's 'immaterial' industry, which destroyed the material mine industry in his hometown of Grosseto (Mark Pietralunga).

Many of the case studies also show how the literary representations of industrial labour conflicted with party ideologies – such is the case of the troubled reception of Giovanni Arpino's *Una nuvola d'ira* (1962) (Tiziano Toracca) and of Goffredo Parise's *Il Padrone* (1965) (Ricciarda Ricorda). The form and contents of these narratives were also conditioned by the influence of editors. A telling example of this is the way in which Calvino and Vittorini, editors at Einaudi, monitored Davì's writings, requesting he offers 'racconti d'agitazione' from inside the factory (Fracassa: 246). Furthermore, many of these contributions demonstrate how much their narratives are linked to their local industries, such as Lucio Mastronardi's Vigeveno stories, which are attached to the town's local shoemaking industry from the 1930s through the 1960s (Giovanni Capecchi). These narrations are prevalently situated in Northern Italy, except for Di Ciaula's *Tuta blu* (1978) poems, which narrate the industrial experience in the Puglia region. In Primo Levi's *La chiave a stella* (1978), Pierpaolo Antonello links mechanical worker Liberto Faussonne's labour ethic to the 'long tradition of Piedmontese thought, characterized by human self-actualization through work' (344). Levi's treatment of labour as life fulfilment thus seems to be an exception on the dystopic masternarrative.

Almost always, the authors are personally involved in the fictional stories they narrate, and in Nanni Balestrini's *Vogliamo tutto* (1971), this engagement becomes a political and aesthetic strategy, moving away from reformist parties' strategies to workers movements' class struggle, and from neorealist stories of redemption to the neo-avant-garde representation of conflicting languages (Pasquale Verdicchio). One could ask why this section has been limited to male writers, and why female representations of labour (Zorat) have been allocated to Part I – perhaps to stress their 'anomaly' within the corpus?

The chronology of Part III, on Italian industrial film, explicitly shows the human, political and ecological consequences of what has been called an anthropological mutation (Pasolini cited in Toracca: 266). The process of capitalist homogenization not only dominates the narratives of displacement of workers from the south of Italy to the north and of Italian labour abroad (Luca Peretti), but also those that represent the destabilizing influence of the factory on gender roles, family and class identity. The film directors discussed in Part III are once again predominantly men, except for Lina Wertmüller. Although this gender imbalance also concerns the films' protagonists, in many cases, the female characters represent a counter narrative that constitutes a feminist perspective of gender and power, even when 'their discourses are made silent by the power of representation' (478), as is suggested by Ilaria A. De Pascalis in her analysis of *Mimi metallurgico ferito nell'onore* (*The Seduction of Mimi*) (1972).

If neorealist film was less interested in the individual than in the universal condition of victimhood and redemption that it represented, the cynical satire of the *commedia all'italiana*, as Louis Bayman demonstrates, focused its critical commentary instead on 'the idiosyncratic way that a particular character feels about the situation' (460, original emphasis). This means that these films highlight the intellectual coming-of-age or the nervous breakdown of their characters who, through their experience with work, are faced with difficulties in adapting to modernity. Some examples are Ermanno Olmi's *Il posto* (1961)

(Veronica Pravadelli) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*) (1964) (Eleonora Lima).

It is important to stress that, in line with Vittorini's and Scalia's statements in *Il Menabò*'s 1961 issue on industrial culture, these directors are exploring new cinematic languages that take into account culture's role as 'the conscience of industry' (Carter: 84) and try to make visible the invisible. In many cases, however, the camera stops before the gates of the factory – in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*) (1960), the emphasis on this physical barrier highlights the transitions and passages from the outside to the inside faced by the Parondi family (Coladonato and Missero: 392–93) – or is even forced to position itself outside of it; Ettore Scola was denied by Agnelli the permission to film the Fiat assembly line for his *Trevico-Torino: Viaggio nel Fiat-Nam* (*Trevico-Turin: Voyage in Fiatnam*) (1973) (Lento: 482–83). Elio Petri's *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (*The Working Class Goes to Heaven*) (1972) is one of the few examples in which the film registers the assembly line from inside the factory, thus becoming one of the great 'cinematic treatments of the social, psychic and political effects of the Fordist production line' (Bayman: 462).

Compared to Part II, the personal involvement of the directors in industrial culture seems to be less decisive than in the case of the writers discussed for industrial literature, although Pravadelli mentions how the experience of sponsored filmmaking was formative for Olmi, who started his career in the 1950s by making industrial films for Edisonvolta (Pravadelli: 408), as well as for Antonioni, who produced a documentary on the manufacturing process of rayon in the SNIA Viscosa factory near Trieste (Lima: 446). The reconstructions of the production of Gillo Pontecorvo's *Giovanna* – as part of a film project promoted by the Women's International Democratic Federation and sponsored by the communist-dominated Confederazione generale italiana di lavoro (Anna Masecchia) – and of Scola's *Trevico-Torino: Viaggio nel Fiat-Nam* – which was produced by PCI's Unitefilm – show the Communist Party's involvement in sponsoring representations of class struggle. The reception history of Mario Monicelli's *I compagni* (*The Organizer*) (1963), whose release in 1963 coincided with tensions within the Italian Socialist Party but was welcomed favourably by the young militants of protest movements in the late 1960s (Mariani: 432), is another case of the non-coincidence between ideology and cultural production. Finally, the use of female characters to pinpoint moments of transition in the male-dominated workers' community is also present in those films that focus instead on the crisis of the male subject, such as Pietro Germi's *L'uomo di paglia* (*A Man of Straw*) (1958) (Federico Vitella) and Luciano Emmer's *La ragazza in vetrina* (*Girl in the Window*) (1961) (Lucia Cardone).

The discussed examples of cultural representations of industrial labour, when conceived with a utopian approach to the humanistic outcomes of the progress of technology, are predominantly pessimistic about the chances for social mobility offered under capitalism. Among the aforementioned workers, the only one who considers himself to be free is named Libertino (by Primo Levi), and Antonello shows how this anomalous figure has gone from being labelled reactionary and unacceptable in the 1970s to a 'paradigmatic model' of positive experiences with crisis situations of post-industrial labour conditions in recent years (347). One can conclude that what emerges from this rich and thoroughly researched volume is that precisely the amount of indecisiveness and ambivalence contained in the discussed narratives could indicate the existence of a field of contradictions in which transformative alternatives can be conceived.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Monica Jansen is assistant professor in Italian literature at the Department of Languages, Literature and Communication at Utrecht University. Her research interests include modernism and postmodernism studies, and more specifically new forms of cultural engagement and activism. She investigates cultural representations of socially relevant topics such as religion, precarity and labour, migration and mobilities, from an interdisciplinary, transmedial and transnational perspective.

Contact: Department of Languages, Literature and Communication, Utrecht University, Trans 10, 3512 JK Utrecht, The Netherlands.

E-mail: m.m.jansen@uu.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7649-5295>