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6 De Sica's Genre Trouble

Laughing Fascism Away?

> Many advise me to write something more important. I have never been able to understand the meaning of this advice. In my view, what I write is of the utmost importance.
>
> —Aldo De Benedetti, "Scusatemi, ma le commedie so scriverle soltanto così . . ."

> In the life of humans . . . the only important thing is to find an escape route.
>
> —Giorgio Agamben, *Pulcinella*

A monstrously giant sovereign, whose torso is made up of a multitude of tiny individual bodies, watches over a citadel: the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is possibly the most iconic emblem in the history of political theory. Discussed at length since the book's release in 1651, the illustration has been interpreted as a powerful visualization of the modern state's demand to incorporate the individual bodies of its subjects, with the goal of assembling a compact, united, and productive body politic. But—besides the sovereign's torso—there are further details in the famous frontispiece worth noticing.[1] For instance: the sovereign, standing beyond the city's territory, is emerging from the sea; the place he is attending to is deserted except for armed guards and plague doctors with their distinctive birdlike beak masks; the heads of the individual bodies constituting the political body, the social macro-machine, are turned toward the sovereign.

The sovereign emerging from the sea illustrates the connection between Western history and water. As we have seen, water can be thought of as

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racial modernity's primal element because, in the wake of the conquistadores' explorations, oceans became the battlefield on which peoples' life or death, freedom or subalternity, depended: nations needed to control the seas to protect themselves from the monstrous dangers that are supposedly creeping into the mainland and threatening the community's biological life, but they also sought to dominate the seas to ensure access to the labor power and raw materials of the colonial realm. The fact that in the frontispiece the only visible inhabitants of the city are soldiers and doctors is a detail that attests to the securitarian and sanitary logics dominating modern state power, the governmental obsession with policing bodies to the point of emptying out social life and turning everyone into servants of the existing order and of collective health. Finally and fundamentally: the subjects' heads oriented toward the king conjure how sovereignty is in the final instance, Giorgio Agamben argues, an "optical illusion" founded on a system of gazes, on a way of looking at the sovereign but also at reality.[2] In order for the population to submit to the state's authority, in order for it to be subject to the iterations of subjectivity that state power proposes and propagates, the community needs to feel in danger but also needs to regard the sovereign as the saving force to which it turns for protection against the imaginary foes endangering the community.

It is in light of this appreciation of sovereign power as a mode of gazing and a system of mediation that we can understand Agamben's investment in comedy as a genre that could oppose the operations of biopolitics. Tricksters, toons, Pinocchio, Pulcinella: comedic characters are for Agamben inspiring role models, the heralds of a coming community, because they refuse to live according to sovereignty's optics—because instead of subjecting themselves to the blackmail of ruling authority, they shun heteronormativity and heteronomy in the name of autonomy and freedom. As Agamben traces, comedy in ancient Greece functioned as an antidote to tragic stances on life and defeatist tendencies.[3] In times of danger especially, comedies instructed the community that living beings can construct a happy future for themselves by using their bodies differently from how they are pressured to do. For this reason, the best comedies—those that stay true to the genre's origins—are the ones that cultivate sociopolitical indocility in the body politic.

So far in *Cinema Is the Strongest Weapon,* I have dwelled on how film under Mussolini staged an Italy under the threat of internal or external enemies, amplifying an experience of national life that secured the regime's

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race-making efforts. Now I consider the tactical counterdeployment of the cinema from weapon of sovereignty into an apparatus that could render inoperative the racializing gaze of fascist realism and thus ultimately contribute to unmaking the compact, policed, and sanitized collectivity the regime had strived to realize. In the next chapter, I show how Luchino Visconti and the *Cinema* media activists mobilized the high-contrast lighting of melodrama to convey simultaneously the bleakness of Blackshirt living and the allure of sexuo-political queerness. Here, I speculate on the ways in which Vittorio De Sica's understudied films from the early 1940s sustained a quasi-anarchist conception of virtue—one where, as happens in exemplary forms of comedy per Jewish philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Walter Benjamin, virtuous behaviors are not those marked by deference and compliance but those characterized by the utmost disregard for the authorities and mechanisms ruling over the present.

BEFORE NEOREALISM

Although so many insightful pages have been dedicated to Vittorio De Sica, his directorial activity before the partnership with Cesare Zavattini has seldom been the focus of attentive critical scrutiny, possibly in part because the movies he directed under Fascism do not fit with hegemonic accounts of what important cinema looks like. *Rose scarlatte* (*Red Roses,* 1940), *Maddalena zero in condotta* (*Maddalena Zero for Conduct,* 1940), *Teresa Venerdì* (*Doctor, Beware,* 1941), and *Un garibaldino al convento* (*A Garibaldian in the Convent,* 1942) are indeed narratively, stylistically, and tonally very different from De Sica's most renowned and celebrated realist works.

As early as his first big collaboration with Zavattini, *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children Are Watching Us,* 1943), De Sica captures the dread characterizing contemporary Italian life, and even after Italy's transition to democracy, from *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine,* 1946) to *Umberto D.* (1952), the award-winning director continued to advance a critique of Italian society focusing on the systemic barriers preventing common people from living well, from living lives that do not end in tragedy. It is precisely in light of the tragic dimension of Zavattini and De Sica's realism that André Bazin juxtaposes their poetics and Franz Kafka's.[4] In both cases, Bazin explains, it is a matter of allegorizing how the socioeconomic structures of modern society push people toward behaviors that are necessarily marked by guilt and shame. The unhappiness to which De Sica's and Kafka's characters are consigned is but the consequence of the unhappy lifeworlds that they inhabit, and

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thus—Bazin concludes—the pessimism of works such as *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves,* 1948) or *The Trial* (1915) constitutes a stern protest against a real that cannot fulfill its promises and is only able to set up the people for failure. There is nothing Kafkaesque or tragic in De Sica's pre-Zavattini and pre-neorealist films—romantic comedies that instead of following men in crisis and at the mercy of state institutions feature young women pursuing transgressive desires and grappling with the apparatuses seeking to contain, to appropriate, their vital energy.

These incredibly successful films sprout from the collaboration between De Sica and a changing team of artists, which included talents occupying minoritized subject positions: two women and a Jewish Italian man. Maria Stephan is credited as assistant director for *Maddalena zero in condotta,* and Margherita Maglione shares credit for the screenplays of *Teresa Venerdì* and *Un garibaldino al convento.* I was not able to find any additional information about these women, who—in a case that is more unique than rare—broke the fascist film industry's glass ceiling and were employed in jobs that were typically the prerogative of men. But the most crucial collaborator for De Sica in these films, as David Bruni proves through invaluable archival research, was the Italian Jewish playwright Aldo De Benedetti—whose first big hit at the movies was Mario Camerini's *Gli uomini che mascalzoni . . .* (*What Scoundrels Men Are!,* 1932), the very film that turned De Sica into a multimedia star.[5]

Although De Benedetti was the main writer for *Rose scarlatte, Maddalena zero in condotta,* and *Teresa Venerdì* and revised the screenplay and dialogues for *Un garibaldino al convento,* he could be credited only in *Rose scarlatte*—which reached movie theaters in spring 1940. Italy's entrance into World War II in June 1940 coincided with an exacerbation of the discrimination against Italian Jews.[6] Blamed for spoiling the authentic ethno-community with their pernicious influence and wicked blood, in the aftermath of the racist laws from 1938, Italians of Jewish descent were banned from working in law enforcement and in the public sector as teachers, doctors, professors, or lawyers. The new discrimination policies also forbade them from being employed in state-managed companies in the cultural industry (music, cinema, radio, theater, etc.). In 1940, this ban was extended to private production companies as well; hence De Benedetti could only write films uncredited—and he wrote many between 1940 and 1945. But someone noticed and publicly complained about this challenge to the autarkic effort of keeping Italian cinema Italian, that is, free from voices and views

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that were considered foreign to the national heritage. In 1943, the journalist Giorgio Almirante, who in 1946 would become the first leader of the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, denounced directors including De Sica, Mario Mattòli, Giuseppe Amato, and Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia for paying "a Jew" under the table to write their films while assisting him in finding other jobs.[7] For Almirante, this was unacceptable. De Benedetti was not to be pitied or sympathized with: he was speculating on his position to get paid more than "Aryan writers" without even paying taxes on his exorbitant profits.

Obviously, De Benedetti's condition was far from being the advantageous one painted by Almirante in his antisemitic rant, putting the man's very livelihood in danger. Bruni has reconstructed with precision the exploitative working terms De Benedetti often had to accept to make ends meet as well as to make himself valuable enough to be shielded from more violent iterations of racial discrimination. Yet with De Sica, the working relationship appears to have been different: the correspondence and contracts I was able to consult at the De Benedetti Private Archive suggest that De Sica treated the playwright with respect, dignity, and fairness, as a peer rather than an exploitable and expendable body. The different relational modality led to some of the most unforgettable films from fascist Italy. Since, however, the rom-coms De Sica directed under Mussolini with De Benedetti as a key author were largely forgotten postwar, it might be useful to briefly summarize their main plot points.

Rose scarlatte, De Sica's debut behind the movie camera, is the adaptation of *Due dozzine di rose scarlatte* (*Two Dozen Red Roses*)—one of the most frequently staged Italian plays of all time, which De Benedetti wrote in 1935 for De Sica's theater company.[8] In the film, Marina (Renée Saint-Cyr) is bored with her conjugal life. In search of new emotions and wanting to enjoy the taste of freedom, she is getting ready to go on a vacation alone. Marina's husband, Alberto (De Sica), is looking forward to her departure, since it will give him the opportunity to court other women. As a matter of fact, he has already started to do so: he just sent two dozen red roses to a countess, signing the accompanying card using the nom-de-plume Mystery. By mistake, Marina is the one who receives the roses, and she believes a secret admirer sent her the flowers. Alberto discovers the mix-up but continues to send Marina roses, to see how far her new desires will take her. In love with Mystery and the unknown, Marina decides to divorce Alberto—until she discovers that her mysterious lover and her husband

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are the same person. In the end, Alberto and Marina forgive each other and leave together for Venice, committed to travel away from their ways and lives.

Maddalena zero in condotta and *Teresa Venerdì* are remakes of Hungarian films also derived from stage plays. *Maddalena zero in condotta* features Elisa Malgari (Vera Bergman), a professor of business correspondence at an all-girls' school. To find relief from her boredom and loneliness, from a life that is so dull that it is barely worth living, she writes love letters to Mr. Hartman, the fictional receiver of the business letters that she teaches her students to write. A Mr. Hartman (De Sica), though, actually exists: he is the heir of an Italian family, the Armanis, who relocated to Austria and Germanized their surname. In a lucky turn of events, he receives one of Elisa's letters and immediately travels from Vienna to Rome to find the author of such an endearing piece of writing. After a series of misunderstandings and gags, the rambunctious student Maddalena (Carla Del Poggio) sets up Hartman with Malgari, while at the same time seducing Hartman's cousin, Stefano (Roberto Villa). Tired of waiting for a move from this nice guy wanting to behave properly, in a memorable scene Maddalena puts on lipstick and kisses Stefano in a shamelessly inappropriate public display of affection.

Teresa Venerdì is the story of an orphan (Adriana Benetti) who falls in love with Pietro Vignali (De Sica), the young doctor who works at the institution where she resides. Another orphan, jealous of Teresa, writes a fake love letter to the doctor, signs Teresa's name, and makes sure the nuns in charge of the orphanage read it. The nuns—alarmed by the letter and wary about how the young woman gazes at the doctor (Figure 26)—decide to send Teresa, who has turned eighteen, to work for a crass butcher. Teresa is forced to flee and finds refuge at the doctor's house. There, she discovers that Dr. Vignali is in a dire economic situation and thus strikes a deal with the father of the doctor's current fiancé: she will leave him alone if all his debts are paid off. She also writes a goodbye letter to the doctor, announcing with plenty of pathos what she has done for him (Teresa comes from a family of performers, after all) and proving all her worth. Vignali falls for Teresa, deciding to marry her and start a new life with her elsewhere.

Un garibaldino al convento is the only one of these films by De Sica that is based on an original scenario. A long flashback takes us from current Italy to the time of the Risorgimento wars. Caterinetta (Del Poggio) is a

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FIGURE 26. Teresa gazes with longing for Dottor Pietro in *Teresa Venerdì* (Vittorio De Sica, 1941).

troublemaker who is sent by her family to a convent where nuns run a boarding school. There she finds her archenemy Mariella (Maria Mercader). Mariella has a secret relationship with Franco (Leonardo Cortese), a Garibaldian fighting to liberate Italy from foreign domination. Before leaving to join the war, Franco gives Mariella *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (*The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*), Ugo Foscolo's heartbreaking 1802 epistolary fiction, as a token of his love. Wounded in battle, Franco hides in the convent where Caterinetta and Mariella are boarded. But the Bourbons are on his trail and assault the convent to capture him. With incredible courage, Caterinetta steals a horse and escapes from the siege and the Bourbons, intercepting the Italian army and leading the charge to save the freedom fighter.

On the basis of an understanding of the labor of cinematic representation still grounded in the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis,* De Sica's entertaining rom-coms have been quickly dismissed in postwar criticism as juvenile concessions to Fascism's distraction industry. As David Forgacs suggests in

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"Sex in the Cinema," the traditional Italian view on fascist media posits that Mussolini's rule benefited from escapist films allowing the public to take a break from the dreariness of life under the regime.[9] But perhaps there is more to De Sica's and De Benedetti's iteration of escapism than scholars—blinded by postwar hegemonic pro-realist prejudices conflating seriousness, progressiveness, and importance—were able to see. Perhaps the anti-tragic and anti-Kafkaesque stance of these pre-neorealist works by De Sica is not the mark of their complicity with power but rather the very key to accessing their oppositional thrust.

In this regard, it is important to point out that De Sica's pre-neorealist films were positively reviewed when they came out by the antifascist film critic and screenwriter Giuseppe De Santis, who was quite severe with Roberto Rossellini's engaged and serious realism. De Santis, who I discuss further in the next chapter, especially praised De Sica's films for the kind of Italian humanity they featured, for the dreamlike Italy they projected on screen, and for the way they ironized situations that one would usually consider the most earnest.[10] I choose, thus, to dwell on the humor, the Italians, and the Italian real from De Sica's films under Fascism to question the intuitive assessment of their politics. I ask: might these overlooked and dismissed films cowritten by an overlooked and dismissed Jewish playwright making art under the conditions of racial discrimination alert us to how laughter can be deployed against racism, sexism, and heteronormative arrangements in collective life, that is, to undo the machinations of biopolitics?

But before getting to De Sica's progressive laughter, allow me a detour to outline a different kind of laughter that has often been confused with resistance. This is the humor that seems, on the surface, to leverage an attack on the powers that be, all the while jovially concealing its own solidarity with the rule of the present.

S/M HUMOR

With his 2011 "The Phenomenology of the *Cinepanettone*," Alan O'Leary effectively challenged Italian film criticism's inclination to consider politically and ethically worthy only the works that capture the real with an uncompromising gloomy gaze. However, his poignant intervention almost ended up sanctioning an opposite and equally problematic scholarly tendency: the tendency to consider as intrinsically liberatory the antics and jouissance that the comedic mode affords. This position is problematic because,

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as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai signal in a 2017 special issue of *Critical Inquiry* dedicated to laughter and humor, "comedy has issues" as well.[11] At a time when the worst of Western history is coming back, in the guise not of tragedy but of farce, it is then even more paramount to emphasize that laughter per se is not necessarily a progressive affect—even when one is laughing at power or at powerful figures. Mockery and trolling have been key building blocks of Donald Trump's and Matteo Salvini's rhetorical strategies, but many former comedians have used the tools of their trade to acquire power and prominence in countries like Brazil, Italy, and—more recently—France. The case of Beppe Grillo, satirist turned political guru of a populist movement not immune to xenophobic and neofascist tendencies, is the perfect case in point to highlight the connection between the current global reactionary cycle and what Arpad Szakolczai dubs the "commedification" of the public sphere.[12]

Grillo acquired new relevance in Italian public life in the late 2000s, after organizing events and manifestations whose point was to flip off political institutions and ridicule their members for their vices and shortcomings. The outrage against degraded politics and wicked politicians that the 2007 "Vaffanculo Day" (literally, "Fuck-Off Day") unleashed was instrumental for Grillo in setting up his own political organization. Grillo's performances of abjection solidified a community of resentful and grandstanding individuals who believed themselves victims of all sorts of conspiracies, considered themselves morally and intellectually superior to everyone else, and thus felt in the right to reclaim power. I mention this example as it confirms how a certain laugh, while apparently disruptive, does not upset but rather reaffirms, but in a dejected form, the status quo. There is a wit that effectively bothers the forces and imaginaries ruling over the present, and a second type of humor that plays the game of the established order. Grillo's humor neatly falls into the latter category, given how it delegitimized institutional figures to foster not structural change but merely a change of the people in charge. Italian Fascism had its own examples of such problematic parodies and satires that, by reducing systemic problems into matters of lax morals or gross ineptitude, foreclosed deeper and more transformative experiences of the present.

Whereas the Turkish magazine *Akbaba* used a scathing dark irony to indict Mussolini's regime as a continuation of European racial capitalism and colonial violence, one could find more superficial jabs at Fascism in the Western international press, including, for instance, vignettes ridiculing

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the Duce as a lap dog at Hitler's service or portraying him as a leader more interested in sexual positions than in military maneuvers.[13] National press, especially the satirical journal *Marc'Aurelio,* featured unflattering takes on Mussolini and other top hierarchs, but like those appearing in Western media, these targeted not the larger historical dynamics but individual behaviors—as if the problem at stake were not the country Fascism had assembled but how certain fascists carried themselves. Camerini's *Il cappello a tre punte* (*The Three-Cornered Hat,* 1935) is a perfect illustration of how ridiculing fascists or people in power is not necessarily a challenge to Fascism or to power.

The historical comedy is set in seventeenth-century Naples under Spanish domination. The city is tired of the constant abuse, and a rebellion is imminent. The governor (Eduardo De Filippo) is disinterested in making things right and spends more time pursuing Carmela (Leda Gloria) than governing his city. He tries everything he can to seduce the beautiful miller, yet all is in vain. Frustrated, the governor jails Carmela's husband, Luca (Peppino De Filippo, Eduardo's brother): since the governor and Luca look alike, the governor's plan is to pass as Luca and trick Carmela into sleeping with him. But Luca escapes from prison and starts posing as the governor—triggering all sorts of misadventures and humiliations for the lecherous ruler. Luca even gets close to bedding the governor's spouse. Confronted by the consequences of his mischief, emasculated, and ridiculed by his people and his own wife, the governor repents and commits to taking the necessary steps to regain trust and authority; he even goes as far as improving the way his subjects are treated.

The fact that Camerini's farcical historical reenactment constituted a caricature of Mussolini was not lost on the public. The Duce's son Vittorio, who was establishing himself as a key figure in fascist cinema, took to the press to defend his father's honor. From the pages of a fascist youth journal, the livid Mussolini heir called for Camerini's exile: his film was simply too anti-Italian and antifascist for the director to remain unpunished. Camerini's reaction? He basically told Vittorio Mussolini to be quiet, suggesting he was a brat who hadn't sacrificed anything for the nation.[14] Camerini flaunted that, in contrast, he had fought in World War I to create a greater Italy, implying that by risking his life for the homeland he had earned the right to speak up and talk back. The proud reference to the war, a crucial moment for Italian nationalism and colonialism, attests how *Il cappello a tre punte* did not intend to contest the imaginaries, affects,

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dynamics, and forms of subjectivity upon which Fascism was founded. In the tradition of Machiavelli's theater, it was instead a matter of using caricature and farcical exaggeration to warn the people in power of behaviors that could put their command at risk, while also deluding the public that the sovereign could indeed become someone that the collectivity could rely on.

At the end of *Il cappello a tre punte,* the governor's wife orders him to put his real clothes back on and to become worthy of them. I want to take notice of this admonition, as it expresses the fundamental operation of Camerini's filmic device: redress constituted authority and functioned to make power appear worthy of itself because—as Agamben posits through the frontispiece of *Leviathan*—the constitution of a stable sociopolitical assemblage depends precisely on the way the sovereign is regarded. The final reconciliation in *Il cappello a tre punte* between sovereign and people, coupled with the benevolent portrayal of the governor's misconduct, confirm that this film was not using laughter to upset Fascism but rather to reinforce its grip on the population.

It is true that spectatorial pleasure in the film is connected with the experience of what we might dub sovereign schadenfreude, that is, the enjoyment derived from watching the pain, downfall, or humiliation of the powerful. Because the misfortunes that the film turns into amusement belong to the governor, one could agree with Carlo Celli that *Il cappello a tre punte* triggers a sadistic relationship to power, a desire to see it harmed that would lead to anti-statist stances in real life.[15] Yet the film crucially pins the possibility of a "happy ending" to the end of the carnivalesque inversion of roles: the abjectification of the governor into a common citizen can only be momentary because, for the miller and her husband to be reunited, the governor needs to regain his position. The appeal of heteronormativity is here mobilized to sanction sociopolitical hierarchies that split the collectivity into rulers and subalterns. Hence, if initially *Il cappello a tre punte* makes the public laugh sadistically at the sovereign, it ultimately concocts desires that lean toward masochism—the desire to see the governor back in his place, the desire for being properly governed, the desire for everything to return to how it was. The church bells accompanying Luca and Carmela as they travel back home at the end of the film are the aural cues of the blessing that constitutes the return to normality. In the final instance, *Il cappello a tre punte* uses humor as an instrument to preach morality and reinstate order. For this reason, Camerini's laughs are not

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antifascist challenges but tools of government; they are, as Mino Argentieri says, "risate di regime," regime's laughs.[16]

Is the laughter elicited by De Sica's rom-coms marked by a different temporality and politics vis-à-vis the ones discussed in this section? I argue that this is the case. On the one hand, De Sica's sentimental comedies push the people to modify their own ways of living rather than promoting the resented self-complacency and sense of superiority that, as I suggested in the example of Beppe Grillo, is a prominent feature of contemporary populisms and para-fascist movements. On the other hand, De Sica's films are committed to turning upside down—in a sort of situationist *detournement*—the very formula and forms of Camerini's cinema. It is almost as if De Sica as director hijacks the very same talents that had made Camerini's fortune (De Benedetti but also Medin) to put his own actorial body at the service of an entirely opposite wager. For Camerini, it is always a matter of weaponizing irony to foster political stability and socioeconomic reproductivity. We have seen it already with Camerini's films starring De Sica: his films are stories of normalization and return to order that weaponize shame to naturalize racialized subject positions and state-sanctioned codes of behavior. De Sica's directed films take leave from the power-complicit humor that characterizes Camerini's cinema and instead contest the very foundations of fascist biopolitics and race-making. Accordingly, De Sica's films mobilize a different kind of spectatorial pleasure, relying on a different form of laughter. In order to explain the features of this humor, I start from the pages Bergson dedicated to the experience of the comic—especially noteworthy because, when reviewing De Sica's comedies in 1942, De Santis noticed a Bergsonian quality to them.

VITAL OPTIMISM

Bergson's *Laughter* dates back to 1900.[17] What is most relevant in this context about the French Jewish philosopher's influential reflections on the comic mode is the connection he draws between laughter and the experience of an excessive rigidity of individual and collective behaviors. As emerges with even more clarity in his later works, especially *Creative Evolution,* for Bergson the main traits of human life are dynamism and the capacity to re-form itself. Yet despite creative energy being the fundamental feature of human life, individuals and societies can fall prey to traditions and become ossified. If we neglect cultivating our creativity and agency, human life can betray its core nature and acquire characteristics that are distinctive

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to machines and inorganic matter—that is, rigidity, fixity, stiffness, and predictability. In Bergson, Emily Herring sums up, history itself is the result of the dialectic between creative energy and normalizing tendencies, at the level of both individual bodies and the body politic.[18] And the experience of the comical is, for Bergson, the social device that flags those instances where the vital force has lost so much power that it has given way to automatized customs and mechanized behaviors. Laughter, therefore, is an affect that manifests and warns at the same time. What it warns about is the "automatic regulation of society" and what it manifests is the need for human beings to reclaim their creative energy, their power to remake themselves and their lifeworlds.

Through his discussion of laughter as a warning affect signaling the excessive standardization of existence and of the comic as a challenge to the depotentiation of human beings' vital agency, Bergson specifies the theory of incongruity. According to the theory of incongruity, laughter is the reaction to a perceived radical difference between how things or people should be ideally, and how they actually are, that is, between expectations and experience.[19] For Bergson, the ideal world is a world ruled by change and creativity, and it is for this very reason that his reflections on laughter imply a structural relation between the comic and the dimension of futurity. By pointing out the absurdity of a hyper-regulated real, of mechanized forms of life, of existences that are dulled and petrified by all sorts of interiorized automatisms, a certain kind of humor does in fact interrupt the ruling order of things to reactivate the drive to evolve and experiment in the human body. In a certain sense for Bergson, those who experience laughter are sent into the future; they are consigned to the dimension of virtuality. De Sica's comedies conjure a similar kind of laughter, one that lifts living beings from the weight of an overdetermined reality and conveys them to the unexplored potentialities that the future might hold. Because a *deliverance* is in play, it is appropriate that De Sica's rom-coms all feature letters as key elements of their narratives.

Mystery's notes to Marina in *Rose scarlatte* (Figure 27), the love letters in *Maddalena zero in condotta* and *Teresa Venerdì,* and the gift of *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* in *Un garibaldino al convento*: by staging the effects of these pieces of writing on the bodies, desires, and lives of those who send and those who receive them, De Sica allegorizes the power of writing and fiction in general, and cinematographic writing and fiction specifically, to ridicule the normalized lives people live in the present and hence favor

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different ways of being an Italian body. We are very far from the weaponization of cinema as an apparatus used to naturalize identities and subject positions. De Sica's investment in film does not appear connected with the medium's power to capture life, to contain and put to work bodies' vital energies. Rather, he seems more concerned with cinema's capacity to enable a rejection of the interiorized norms of behavior that dominated the fascist present. The camera in his films does not judge but empowers; it does not condemn the will to escape but rather spotlights the appeal of noncompliance. What is at play in his works is not so much what the fascist race ought to be but the very fact that Italians can become different—thanks to writing, thanks to fiction, thanks to laughter, and thanks to cinema and the affordances of freedom, leisure, and liberality that escapism allows. For this reason, the settings of these comedies are also quite significant.

De Sica's films take place in what we would consider disciplinary and disciplined spaces: the home (*Rose scarlatte*), the school (*Maddalena zero in condotta*), the orphanage (*Teresa Venerdì*), and the boarding school (*Un garibaldino al convento*). However, their rules and codes, that is, the writing

FIGURE 27. Marina reading and dreaming of Mystery in *Rose scarlatte* (Vittorio De Sica, 1940).

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systems that norm their functioning, are shown as "always-already" disrupted by the clash with the writings of desire. By setting his narratives in Italy rather than abroad—as was often the case for escapist works—De Sica figures a national real that is less controlled than the regime might want to concede. Within these disciplined but disrupted spaces, De Sica represents the conflict between types of writing—fictions versus regulations, love letters versus grade books and bills, and so on. In so doing, he stages the different functions that writing can perform. There are forms of writing that are technologies of the self that both subject and subjectify, discipline and punish, engender and racialize; and there are writing gestures whose wager is the destabilization of reality and identity formations.

Already in Maria Montessori's 1910s theory of education, and then in the post-1960s French feminist tradition, the act of writing has been featured as a performance that can lead to unexpected materialities of the self and of others.[20] De Sica deploys genre cinema as a technology that writes difference through a two-fold Bergsonian laughter. He makes the audience laugh at those who are stuck within traditional rules and defer to the established order, but he also makes the public smile along with the courageous young women who shun hegemonic societal expectations for how they should behave and how they should use their bodies. Ultimately, De Sica's rom-coms conjure an Italian real on the brink between immobilism and change, order and indiscipline. Granted, this is also the situation in Camerini's comedies in which De Sica starred. However, in a film such as *Gli uomini che mascalzoni . . .*, spectatorial pleasure hinges on the reaffirmation of the gendered and racialized boundaries of fascist biopolitics. Through shaming, Camerini put everyone back in their place and contributed to annihilating what Levinas, as we saw in chapter 4, dubbed the capacity of escaping oneself. It is also for this reason that his films have a circular form. In De Sica's escapism, instead, we experience a romanticization of the effort to break free from the identitarian interpellations that rule society, an authorization of human beings' uncontainable vitalism and vitality. Unlike Pirandello's and Sergi's, this vitalism is not cruel. There is a vital optimism at play here since living beings are portrayed as perfectly able to fashion good lives for themselves, without being restrained or disciplined by state apparatuses.

In fact, in De Sica's cinematic worlds, bodies are not destined to certain naturalized roles or subject positions: there is no pre-lapsarian "before" to which the camera urges characters, and spectators with them, to return.

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But there is also no urgency or emergency, no exceptional existential threat or race war that would require subjects to make obligatory choices and commit to prescribed ways of living—to even endure minoritization and embrace fungibility, as women or Jewish people often had to do to survive Mussolini's Italy. The Italy that manifests itself in these romantic comedies is a radically anti-tragic space where bodies do not expose themselves to danger or retribution when they dare to pursue the pleasure principle and, akin to Herman Melville's Bartleby, prefer not to become cogs of the social machine, with all its rules and regulations.

It is precisely because there is nothing holding these human beings back, nothing disallowing characters from pursuing desires that bring them away from work, duties, and sacrifices, that De Sica's affective landscapes bear no trace of shame or guilt. There is nothing wrong with the fact that Marina from *Rose scarlatte* just wants to enjoy herself and even decides to leave her husband to pursue, literally, the unknown. There is nothing inappropriate in the gaze through which Teresa reveals her desire for the young doctor Pietro in *Teresa Venerdì*. It is not a problem at all if, in *Un garibaldino al convento,* young women read prohibited books that make them long and yearn instead of submitting to the rules of virtue and moderation Catholic school tries to implant in their bodies (Figure 28). Maddalena, in *Maddalena zero in condotta,* wants to eat pastries and make out with the man she is trying to seduce rather than learn how to be a skilled secretary and behave like a "good girl," and the film articulates a nonjudgmental space wherein she and the public can indulge these transgressive appetites (Figure 29).

Considering that De Sica's unapologetic women arrived at the movies when the quality of Italian life was becoming even more grim, why shouldn't his rom-coms be interpreted as release valves at a historical juncture characterized by war, violence, pain, and sacrifice? One could argue, for instance, that the shameless women protagonists from De Sica's films were characters male spectators could fantasize about, finding relief from real women and the real world. Were this true, these works would include a sexualization of the female body along with the representation of epicurean behaviors. Instead, despite the allusion to a freer sexuality not necessarily connected with the realms of reproduction (social or sexual), De Sica does not give in to the male gaze.

Mouths, legs, smiles, and cleavage captured in soft focus through close-ups or sensuous camera movements are nowhere to be found in his comedies; there are no sexual fetishes to be stared at and neatly framed by the

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FIGURE 28. Vain attempts to discipline female bodies in *Un garibaldino al convento* (Vittorio De Sica, 1942).

FIGURE 29. Maddalena getting ready to satisfy her appetites in *Maddalena zero in condotta* (Vittorio De Sica, 1940).

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camera. Instead of turning the young women he features into passive objects to be looked at, De Sica stages them as active subjects to be looked up to. Marina, Maddalena, Teresa, Mariella, and Caterinetta are inspiring agents of change and progress in his films, and their agency is figured by the director through a hard-to-frame mobility and energy. De Sica's young women are in perpetual motion: they go in and out of the frame constantly, bringing an element of disorder into the picture that mirrors the generative disorder they bring into the ridicule and regulated lifeworlds in which they dwell but to which they do not belong. It is thus a new gaze on traditionally minoritized subjects that is here a matter of sustaining. It is a nonmale gaze on Italy and Italians that is being subtly conjured in these rom-coms.

The male gaze itself is exhibited and ridiculed in one of the most amusing sequences from *Maddalena zero in condotta,* as Ramsey McGlazer unpacks in a brilliant essay.[21] Hartman and his cousin visit the school where Malgari teaches and where Maddalena is a student to try to identify who wrote the mysterious love letter. Their plan—not the brightest, to be sure—is to observe the students, hoping to catch some kind of tell that would betray the letter's author. The school custodian accompanies them through the halls, where they review the students' bodies as the girls rush to class. What is crucial about this scene is what De Sica frames to be gazed at: not the female students but the male gazers themselves. The students go through the halls, too fast to even be identified, and while being observed (in vain), they audaciously stare back at their observers (the school is named Audax, after all, McGlazer notes) and run off scene. They do not fall prey to the male gaze and they do not allow the gaze of the men to capture them. The men, instead, stand still with glassy eyes, staring at bodies that inevitably flee away from them. The janitor, having noticed Hartman's wonderstruck stare, asks him to stop looking—so to avoid making a "brutta figura," a poor figure (Figure 30). But it is the film as a whole that, as the janitor does in this scene, works to disfigure the male gaze, challenging the cinematic vision that finds pleasure in fetishizing and objectifying female bodies. Throughout *Maddalena,* the male gaze is constantly cited and renounced.

The film does offer several glimpses of disciplined female bodies, for instance in class or at the gym, but these choral and beautiful images of mechanical order, and the pleasure that one could derive from their consumption, are invariably upset. In the gym scenes, the camera (by pulling

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FIGURE 30. Disfiguring the white male gaze in *Maddalena zero in condotta* (Vittorio De Sica, 1940).

back in one case, and through a lateral pan in the other) immediately redirects the public's attention away from the disciplined assembly of young women, spotlighting instead the broken-down body of the elderly gym teacher. The amusing object of the gaze here is "the leader [who] cannot lead," a man who keeps going with his routine with ridiculous results, not the tamed bodies that he is supposedly in charge of.[22] Analogously, in sequences taking place in the classroom, the cinematographic apparatus captures momentary instances when the students behave in an orderly and controlled fashion, for example when the girls sit still and are terrorized, subjected to the gaze of the male chemistry teacher. Yet this stiffness, this dullness, brings the viewer no satisfaction. In De Sica's universe, indiscipline, playfulness, and the interruption of the normal order of things are what lead to joy. It is only when the superficially tamed collectivity erupts, when order is disrupted by Maddalena's and her allies' antics, that the public rejoices.

In an essay from 2001, Celli recognizes in the chemistry teacher a stand-in for Giovanni Gentile—the philosopher responsible for Fascism's reform

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of the school system who would be executed by the partisans in 1944 for his collaboration with the Salò puppet state.[23] In light of Celli's identification, it is particularly important that *Maddalena* casts such a dark shadow on this disciplinarian professor and the ways he treats the students: the camera does not shy away from pointing out his violence as he selects a subject to examine, and by underscoring this sadism, the apparatus abjures the workings of authority and discipline. Unlike in other important "schoolgirl films"—for instance the initiator of this subgenre, Goffredo Alessandrini's *Seconda B* (*Second B,* 1934)—the public does not identify with he who lays down the law but with she who has no regard for it. Alessandrini's film foregrounded the dangerous desires that dwell in young women's bodies and lead them to inappropriate behaviors, inside and outside the classroom—making the spectatorship sympathize with the males in power who are victims of the girls' mischief. As Marcia Landy comments, *Seconda B* depicts female students in an unsympathetic manner bordering on misogyny.[24] In De Sica, it is the opposite. The role models are precisely those who do not sit still and who refuse to be assimilated into the system, those whose bodies do not conform. The role model is Maddalena, who constantly looks for opportunities to create havoc and shows the utmost disrespect for constituted authorities and social norms. It is her gaze on the world that the public is made to embrace, because her creative energy is irresistible—not even the chemistry teacher can do anything to counter it. After having been hit by a storm of paper balls, the Gentile look-alike appears incredulous at the latest of Maddalena's mischief (Figure 31). What is happening? Coats are moving around the classroom by themselves, appearing to greet each other with empty sleeves? Speechless, perplexed, afraid, the professor takes off his glasses and stares with his eyes wide open—visual cues of a gaze in crisis and a compromised authority.

Yet it is not merely the authority of the male gaze that is mocked in *Maddalena.* The authority, the power of the men embodying a certain way of looking, undergoes a similar challenge. These men, for *Maddalena,* are white men—the male gaze in the film is a white men's thing, it is a white male gaze. Thus, in featuring a powerless male gaze, is not the film also somehow deconstructing the authority of whiteness? Allow me to circle back to the scene of Hartman inappropriately gazing at the students because it brings up—in a quite subtle way—the issue of race and racism.

The school custodian, we remember, had urged Hartman to stop looking, yet the admonition comes too late: the gazing man is caught red-handed

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FIGURE 31. Visions of disbelief: authority in crisis, from *Maddalena zero in condotta* (Vittorio De Sica, 1940).

by the school headmistress. In the next scene, in line with the nonlinear and fragmentary narrative style of De Sica's comedies, *Maddalena* does not feature the confrontation between the headmistresses and Hartman but cuts back into the classroom. The geography teacher, *professoressa* Varzi, is speaking with passion of the anthropological characteristics of the Georgian people, who—she says—at times are considered the "ideal prototype of the white race." After making sure that the students are taking notes—they aren't; they are working on the next prank—she continues to preach about Georgian men, who "with their majestic build, but at the same time slender, dark, and handsome features, endowed with a certain uncommon physical force, remind more of mythical heroes rather than people of our time." The school bell rings, and she stops abruptly: the zeal with which Varzi was venerating white people is just her job, a job that she was not doing particularly well given the students' lack of engagement and interest.

As the *professoressa* exits the room, we enter into the office of the headmistress, who wants to understand what Hartman and his cousin are doing

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in her female high school, exchanging such looks with teenagers. She questions the two men, who clumsily try to explain their presence. Is this what white men are? Is this the master race for which Italians had to go to war, colonize, enslave, die, and kill, the race for which someone like De Benedetti was being persecuted and discriminated? Are these the descendants of the glorious white people we just heard about in class and that Fascism wanted kids to believe in? On the one hand, *Maddalena* ridicules coeval racial science by mediating it as a discourse that is both overblown and underwhelming. On the other hand, the film introduces a humorous discrepancy between what Italian men—insofar as they are white people—are promised to be and what they actually are: not the protagonists of a mythic destiny and of epic feats but characters of ridicule who look at things and people in the wrong way.[25] If we think about it, this is a constant throughout De Sica's comedies from the Ventennio: Italian men are put on display and then mocked. Overall, national masculinity does not come off particularly well in these films.

In *Maddalena,* Hartman is a playboy of sorts; his cousin borders on incompetent; the gym teacher is falling apart; the chemistry professor is an outdated disciplinarian; and the janitor is a sexist wimp who thinks that "chicks" can do without math and history but not without lipstick and powder—thus his wife, who does not wear makeup, is not a real woman in his eyes. In *Rose scarlatte,* Marina's husband seems a bit sadistic and his sidekick is inept. The doctor from *Teresa Venerdì* is another good-for-nothing, and then there is the crass and violent butcher Teresa is sent off to. The father figures from *Un garibaldino al convento* are not impressive either: they are stuck in worn-out formalities, upholding an outdated idea of culture and the arts, spending their time in meaningless squabbles. There are a couple of notable exceptions to this derision of Italian masculinity—which is, *Maddalena* established, the toxic masculinity of white people. Both are from *Un garibaldino al convento*: there is the estate's keeper Tiepolo (Fausto Guerzoni), an offbeat man who disobeys the no-animal rule at the convent and lives with a cloud of singing blackbirds; and there are the heroic Garibaldians, the most radical and revolutionary subjects among the Risorgimento fighters, since they were fighting not only to liberate Italy from foreign occupation but also to build a democratic, progressive, and secular country. Yet even in these cases, the representation of Italian men is not immune from critique. Both Tiepolo and the Garibaldians look down at Caterinetta and treat her like a *ragazzina,* a little girl. One of the freedom

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fighters dares even to spank Caterinetta to put her in her place. But she speaks up against this violent and sexist infantilization, demanding to be treated with dignity and respect. "I am not a kid; I am one of you," she says to De Sica, playing the part of a perplexed-looking Nino Bixio. And De Sica, as director, concedes to Caterinetta's demands.[26] In fact, later in the film, we see her riding at the head of the squadron of red-shirted Garibaldians, leading the charge to rescue their comrade. A woman who is also a freedom fighter: there are not many of them throughout Italian cinema, with the overbearing gaze equating womanhood to wifehood and motherhood precluding the possibility of imagining a plurality of ways of "being women"—to quote the title of Cecilia Mangini's documentary ending with a woman with a rifle on her shoulder and walking away toward her fight.

But if it is true that De Sica's rom-coms use Bergsonian humor to make fun of interiorized norms and mechanized living, if they subtly mock racism and sexism, if truly these genre films deconstruct the white male gaze's authority and the authority of the gazing white males, do they construct and authorize any particular alternative gaze? What kind of nation do they want the public to believe in? What affective experience of the national space-time do they sustain?

With their fragmentary and episodic structure, thanks to fast-paced narratives that continuously alternate between the establishment of order and order's disruption and where the characters' actions never come to a halt, De Sica's comedies assemble a world that is immersed in becoming, a reality that is striated by norms and desires that are irreconcilable with each other and whose clashes generate precarious arrangements of sociality that are always on the brink. These blockbusters mediate an exuberant body politic that has constantly been made, unmade, and remade: not a homogeneous, compact, serious totality but a playful constellation of plural ways of living in the country. The effort that appears to dominate De Sica's early films is to sustain an experience of Italy marked by a *Spielraum* that is actually greater than what one would expect in a totalitarian state.

Spielraum—field of action or room for play—is a concept I borrow from Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."[27] In an early version of the famous essay written in response to Nazi Fascism's aestheticization of politics, Benjamin considers different uses of technology, distinguishing between capitalist technologies that subject individuals to the drudgery of productive living and an alternative deployment of technology that can instead expand the horizons of human

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existence. Cinema for the German Jewish philosopher is the key apparatus in this second use of technology, insofar as the machine has the ability to expose how alienated and exploited are the lives that people live in service of the assembly line. Quite unexpectedly, as Miriam Hansen shows, in Benjamin's viewpoint, the genre that could most productively carry out this revelation of alienation was comedy. Entering into an implicit dialogue with Bergson, Benjamin suggests that characters' actions in comedies showcase the possibility of playing with the order of things—triggering in the public the invigorating and liberating awareness that there is no overdetermined destiny or tragic fate holding human beings captive to hegemonic lifestyles or sociopolitical formations.[28] In De Sica's comedies, the "things" characters play with and act upon are the family, the school, the home—that is, apparatuses responsible for the production of racialized and gendered Italian bodies. By featuring affective challenges to these biopolitical devices that sought to make proper Italians, the director is thereby able to reenchant the gaze through which the nation is looked at, conveying that Italy is not a country dominated by inviolable codes of behavior but rather a territory with plenty of room for action and enough space for effective identity maneuvering.[29]

The most glaring manifestation of this effort to reenchant Italy is from *Rose scarlatte.* In a scene bordering on magic realism, Marina, in a spectacular white fur coat, is watching an outdoor ballet performance, with Mystery whispering in her ears about the allure of embracing the unknown; the magic of what might be and what might happen if one is brave enough to believe in the future is felt distinctively in this sequence (Figure 32). The real danger De Sica's characters face is not constituted authority: in the end, the fascist apparatuses' grip on Italian life is shown time and again to be too ridiculous and ineffective to be taken seriously. The real danger, as it was for Bergson, lies in defeatism and habituation. As professor Elisa Malgari suggests in *Maddalena zero in condotta,* the problem is that people adapt to living in the real world, so they give up on their dreams. To protest this situation, Malgari behaves in the fashion of a "killjoy," as defined by Sara Ahmed.[30] She does not smile, pretending all is well; she gets in the way of other people's enjoyment by pointing out with aloofness that the present world, the world of work and domestic labor, is grim and that only in a different world could authentic joy be gained. And De Sica himself, in Hartman's role, sustains Malgari's protest against disenchantment: he explains that there is no logic in no longer living one's dreams, in giving in

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to disillusion, because sometimes dreams and reality coincide, and reality is often even better than dreams. But since this is the case, then the best way to live reality is to keep dreaming. Appropriately, the most inspiring quality De Sica's characters share is that they do not give in to life as it is or concede to factual reality; rather, they use imagination, creativity, and ingenuity in the pursuit of happiness and to explore new possibilities of life.

Teresa Venerdì reflects explicitly on the regenerative and salvific function of imagination in a reality where violence and discipline are presented as the solution to any problem. In an emblematic scene, Teresa reads lines from *Romeo and Juliet* with a friend, finding a way to escape the sad reality of the orphanage but also articulating desires she still does not know how to handle. Theater is a serious matter because it teaches how to live, says Teresa to the person who is trying to shame her for having played out a love scene. And in fact the orphan will use fiction to survive her difficult reality. As Jacqueline Reich notes, Teresa masquerades often and plays different roles until she becomes the persona she needs to be for the doctor to choose her over the other two women with whom he is involved: a talentless poet (Irasema Dilián) and a vaudeville actor (Anna Magnani).

FIGURE 32. Reenchanted Italy from *Rose scarlatte* (Vittorio De Sica, 1940).

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Landy has observed that Dr. Vignali chooses the best performer for his companion. However, Reich, through Butler, specifies that the performance in the film is life itself: performance is a means to achieve one's goals and dreams, Reich concludes in "Reading, Writing, and Rebellion."[31] Yet it is also true that the goals and dreams entertained by the protagonists of De Sica's comedies are not so transgressive or revolutionary after all.

Contrasting *Maddalena zero in condotta* and Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* (1933), McGlazer points out in this regard that while the formal structure of Vigo's featurette builds up to the final rebellion during which the students occupy the school, in De Sica's film, despite the nods to indocility and anti-authoritarianism, "all roads lead to the living room, where utopia is closed off."[32] Toward the film's end, in fact, Hartman, Malgari, Maddalena, and her sweetheart convene in Maddalena's parlor, where misunderstandings are resolved and marriage plans are laid out under the watchful eye of Maddalena's father. The killjoy and the trickster eventually become docile subjects that belong at home.

The ruse of De Sica's cinematic reason coalesces around this: to let the spectators indulge in a fantasy of freedom, in the illusion that there is enough room and magic in the world for anyone to be able to fulfill their dreams and desires, while simultaneously teaching that the nuclear family, and by extension sociopolitical reproduction, is the ultimate dream. The scene where Hartman teaches Malgari how to dance is a particularly revealing one for McGlazer, as De Sica in this instance would be performing the same operation the film itself is carrying out: teaching uncooperative bodies how to move appropriately while pretending to release them from the societal impositions and gendered interpellations that burden their lives.

There is no doubt that in mocking the outdatedness and inefficacy of traditional apparatuses and strategies of government, De Sica is also building up the cinematographic apparatus's soft power—its power to intervene in collective life and impact the nation's bodies without resorting to violence. Such remediation especially comes through in *Teresa Venerdì,* in which De Sica plays the part of the young doctor replacing the old crone whose go-to medicine for all the girls' problems was castor oil—the remedy also used by Fascism to treat political opponents.[33] Although this textual reference confirms De Sica's interest in remediating the role that cinema could play in national health at a crucial historical juncture, I am less sure than McGlazer that the audiovisual forms concocted by the director work according to the logic of "repressive tolerance" and toward a postdisciplinary

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disciplining of the body politic. Even De Sica's anti-utopic endings maintain a remarkable heterotopic valence insofar as they formally sustain the desire to travel elsewhere, to evade reality as is—to look for ways out of a ruined present.

In this regard, Reich notes that the heteronormative idea of the good life that materializes in Italian schoolgirl comedies' happy endings is often a negotiation with the laws of genre fiction, a concession to the cultural industry, which, however, is not able to foreclose the utopic imaginaries that these films' rhetorical structures unleash. The boundaries and limitations to agency, autonomy, mobility, and rebellion that some films' narrative arcs evoke are in fact for Reich ephemeral and subject to rupture given the power of the dreams of pleasure and horizons of freedom previously mobilized.[34] This holds true for De Sica's commercial fictions as well, to the point that their endings are themselves ruptures and ruptured. The very form of his early films affords an openness to the dimension of futurity that seems to me in stark contrast with other forms of escapism, for instance—as I have argued—Camerini's.

In *Rose scarlatte,* Marina and Alberto reconcile, but they also decide to leave for Venice together—in a sequence that resembles the ending of Federico Fellini's *I vitelloni* (*The Bullocks,* 1953). The last shot of the film is a POV shot of the couple that, from the train, look out from the window and leave behind Rome and the life that they know: are they really saying goodbye to mystery and the unknown, or does this finale feature a journey toward a new life?

Analogously, *Teresa Venerdì* does not end with a return but with a departure. In contrast to the Hungarian play on which it was based, De Sica's film does not come to a close inside a home but on the run: Teresa is taken away from the orphanage by Dr. Pietro; they will get married, but they will also relocate to a different city and move on to a different reality. Film forms redundantly accentuate this twofold redemptive flight from a compromised here and now. In the final moments of the movie, we see Teresa and her doctor walking away and exiting the frame not once but twice: the first time when they leave the orphanage, and the second when they leave the post office from where Dr. Vignali has communicated to his father the decision to start afresh somewhere else. The first case is particularly audiovisually rich when reviewed today, as it anticipates the security camera aesthetics embraced, for instance, in Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (2015). Teresa and Pietro are captured from the point of view of the orphanage's

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director, who from her office on the second floor is tracking the couple's movement. By framing them through a high-angle shot that is also the POV of authority, De Sica turns Teresa and Pietro's departure from the orphanage into an allegorical withdrawal from the oppressive reach of control and discipline (Figure 33). The children's choir we hear in the background sets the tone for the scene and romanticizes the couple's flight out of sight.

The last sequence in *Maddalena* cuts away from the living room, where marriage plans are discussed, to the classroom. The headmistress is teaching business correspondence until the school finds a substitute for Professor Malgari. After the havoc caused by the letter that reached Mr. Hartman, the headmistress has decided that it is safer to come up with a new fictional addressee: the students will now write to Mr. Carlos Eredia from Barcelona. Yet a student stands up and interrupts the headmistresses: are we sure, she jokes, making everyone laugh, that Carlos does not exist either? Notable in this finale are two things. The first is that both Malgari and Maddalena have deserted the fascist school apparatus: the embrace of their bodily desires has brought them elsewhere, to a place that remains a mystery. But it is also important that the film leaves the last words to a student who might

FIGURE 33. Teresa and Pietro evading the gaze of control at the end of *Teresa Venerdì* (Vittorio De Sica, 1941).

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take Maddalena's place as troublemaker and has already given herself the right to talk back to power, questioning—through her humorous parrhesia and the laughter it provokes—the distinction between truth and fiction, real and imaginary, possible and impossible.[35]

Finally, *Un garibaldino al convento* does not even build up to a traditional happy ending. After the long flashback to the Risorgimento epoch, the film returns to the present, where we discover that Mariella's Garibaldian soldier died in combat and the young woman was never able to forget him. So more than the end result, more than how and where the story finishes, what is key in this comedy is the emphasis on the urgency of living the life one wants to live no matter what—even if such a life does not align with the life deemed natural, normal, and appropriate by ruling authorities and traditions, even if such a life veers away from the horizons of reproductive futurity.

We should not forget that De Sica's rom-coms were produced at a moment when the state was tasking Italian men and women with abject assignments in the name of their race's survival, subjecting the population to progressively direr sacrifices, and imposing more severe restrictions on Italian bodies' autonomy and freedom. We also need to remember that these comedies about women resisting capture and grappling with heteronormativity were cowritten by a Jewish man facing discrimination. By keeping these details in mind, the critical thrust of De Sica's cinematic authorization of the fight against societal impositions and to reclaim control over one's own body might become even more readable. When power becomes so prominently interested in how people live, resistance to power becomes a matter of living differently. "Resistance," hence, is a quality of De Sica's escapist works insofar as they promote the feeling that a good life is the life that evades the tragic dictates of work, duties, and sacrifice, an easy, playful, entertaining life that transgresses the boundaries of what was allowed and afforded to the early 1940s Italian body politic. Although they do not articulate an explicit critique of the fascist real, through laughs and smiles, *Rose scarlatte, Maddalena zero in condotta, Teresa Venerdì,* and *Un garibaldino al convento* write into public imagination the invigorating sensation that escaping the gendered and racialized impositions of fascist biopolitics is not only possible and right; it is the fun thing to do. Aren't these films, then—to quote De Benedetti—of the "utmost importance"?[36]

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