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## Cinema and the city. Milan and Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers* (1960)

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### Abstract

*Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960) was one of Luchino Visconti's most controversial and popular films. This tragic story of six immigrants (five brothers and their mother) who arrive in Milan from Basilicata has become an important part of the historical image held by Italians of the mass southern migration of the boom years. This article looks at two broad areas with regard to *Rocco and his Brothers*, using material from the Visconti archive as well as contemporary newspaper articles and the work of film critics. First, the relationship between Milan and *Rocco* is analysed, and the complicated representation of the city in the film. Second, the issue of migration is examined, with special regard to the use of stereotypes and the various phases of preparation and research carried out by Visconti and his colleagues during the making of *Rocco*. What emerges is a contradictory and multi-layered movie which tries to combine a series of elements including social criticism, melodrama, literary and historical origins and political radicalism within a grand fresco of passionate human tragedy.

### Keywords

Film studies, urban studies, Luchino Visconti, Milan, migration.

*'Making a film about Milan signifies making a film about Italy',*

*'Spaventa i "benpensanti" Rocco e i suoi fratelli'.*

*(Avanti!, 14 October 1960)*

*'I see these people who come from the south, in the trains, and it is really like that, it is all true.'*

*(Rail worker interviewed in the press after seeing Rocco)<sup>1</sup>*

## 1 Introduction

Italy's 'economic miracle' reached its apex in the 'five glorious years' between 1958 and 1963. Thousands of Italians left their villages to seek their fortune in the industrial north. The Meccas were two – Milan and Turin. At least 400,000 immigrants arrived in Milan in fifteen years. In 1958 Luchino Visconti decided to make a film about these immigrants. After two years of meticulous research, endless rewrites and problems with producers, judges and local politicians, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* was finally completed. It was released to critical acclaim and public controversy at the 1960 Venice Film Festival, where its failure to win the top award (the Golden Lion) was due only to a farcical, politically inspired compromise.<sup>2</sup> The opening night in Milan in October of the same year was even more controversial, making front page news across Italy as boos, insults and whistles were mixed with applause. More censorship problems followed and the original version of the film was butchered, only to resurface in a restored version in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

The year 1960 was central for Italian cinema. In the space of ten months, three very different and influential films were released: *La dolce vita*, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* and *L'avventura*. All met with censorship difficulties. All opened in Milan and had difficult opening nights. All became the subject of national political and cultural debate – leading to questions in parliament, hundreds of headlines in the press and 'interventions' by intellectuals, politicians and leading members of the Church hierarchy. The first two films were also huge hits at the box office, becoming the two top-grossing films of the 1960–1 season.

## 2 The importance of *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*

*Rocco* was a crucial film for a number of reasons. First, for Visconti himself, it marked a complicated 'return' to so-called neorealist values, an attempt to make the long-awaited sequel to the most famous neorealist film *La terra trema*, twelve years on, and after the theatrical unreality of *Le notti bianche*, made in 1957 and viciously attacked by even Visconti's fiercest supporters.<sup>4</sup> Second, *Rocco* was the first film (and the last, excepting the short *Il lavoro*) that Visconti ever made in his native Milan. Third, *Rocco* was the last film in which Visconti dealt with what I will euphemistically call the 'lower classes' of society. After *Rocco*, his work in the cinema increasingly centred on aristocrats, the rich, Fascists, kings and so on. He was never, so to speak, to stoop so low again. Fourth, *Rocco* encouraged enormous debate at a whole series of levels in Italy and abroad – about cinema, about migration and the 'economic miracle', about violence, sex and censorship, about realism and melodrama and tragedy, about the relationship between cinema and social transformation. These discussions were not purely among critics and cinema experts, but also raged in the popular press, in bars, front rooms and factories across Italy.<sup>5</sup>

All these debates continued through the 1960s – and *Rocco* became emblematic of a certain historical period in Italian life. The film developed into a kind of

historical document for many – the representation of some sort of truth about the upheavals of the boom. In an age when television revealed nothing about what the Communist Party called 'Il prezzo del miracolo', *Rocco* raked through the dirty washing of Italian society – and was seen by hundreds of thousands of Italians at home and abroad (albeit often in heavily censored versions). The *Corriere della Sera* estimated that 600,000 people had seen the film in the two weeks after its release.<sup>6</sup> *Rocco* developed into many people's 'memory' of the boom – at least for those who had no direct relationship with Milan or with the hundreds of thousands of migrants who arrived in the city in the 1950s and 1960s (and this has to include the Milanese bourgeoisie). Even in 1960, two million Italians were going to the cinema every day, and a film like *Rocco* pressed itself into the popular consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Italian cinema audiences and film production were still the biggest in Europe in 1960.<sup>8</sup> *Rocco* remains, of course not reductively and not only, a historical document of great value, filtered through the artistic processes decided upon by Visconti and his collaborators. And the 'historical' value of this document is also to be judged by the debates and the reception of the film in Italy in that crucial year of 1960. Of course, this place within the 'memory' of a nation and a city has changed over time – *Rocco* recently made a reappearance in Italian newsagents as a boxing film, sold with the sports paper *Tuttosport* – but its power and effectiveness as the 'unofficial' version of the fate of immigrants in the 1960s remains, I would argue, undiminished if deeply flawed.

This article concentrates on three historical tasks with regard to Visconti's film. First, it will tell the story of the film and its relationship with popular memory about the boom and Milan during the 'economic miracle'. Second, there is a detailed analysis of the representation of the city in the film and the 'many cities' present in *Rocco*. Third, the most important theme of the film – migration – is looked at in depth. The sources for this work are a mixture of visual material, the film itself, published reviews, books and press articles and above all unpublished (and often unseen) archive material. The rich and newly catalogued Visconti archive is now open to scholars and has allowed a reconstruction of the preparation of the film, the myriad versions of the script and the debates over the storyline, the cast and locations. This rich material, combined with an analysis of the final version of the movie, presents us with a more complete version of the history and motivations behind *Rocco* than the film itself taken in isolation. *Rocco* emerges from this article as an extremely complicated and contradictory work. The myriad tensions involved in the whole enterprise were never fully resolved, above all the 'milanesità' of Visconti and his vision of the south and southerners, the links between neorealism, melodrama and Visconti's political beliefs, and the use of stereotypes and violence as 'typical' of immigrant experience. The multi-layered nature of the film and its construction compels us to revisit and rethink *Rocco* and its place in Italian popular culture.

### 3 The city and the film: Milan and Rocco

*'There has never been so much of Milan in one film.'*<sup>9</sup>

Visconti was as Milanese as they come, his family being a mixture of the great urban aristocracy and the burgeoning industrial ruling class. He was brought up in the city and often worked in Milan, particularly in the theatre and above all at the most famous artistic palace in the city – La Scala – where his family had a private box. Nonetheless, *Rocco* was his first and last film to use Milanese outside locations – a 'dream', as he said, he had long wished to realize. *Rocco* was advertised in 1960 as the film which showed *more of Milan than had ever been seen before*. While critics castigated Visconti for only representing the seedier parts of the city, in reality he showed many sides of the moral capital – the Duomo, the canals or *navigli*, Parco Sempione, the station, as well as the sordid and endless periphery which makes up the backdrop to most of the film. With a few exceptions, previous movies had concentrated on the centre of the city. Visconti showed the whole city – with all its contradictions and visual uncertainties.

In fact, the research for locations for *Rocco* was long, meticulous and detailed. Visconti already knew about certain sites: his family villa had been near to the Ponte della Ghisolfà, where the rape scene takes place; he knew about the Duomo – obviously – and the bridge in the park which had previously been outside another of his palaces in the centre of town. The research was carried out in the Milan about which Visconti knew nothing – the Milan of the immigrants, the new housing estates and the grey, dark, monotonous periphery. Visconti visited these places again and again – with other writers like Suso Cecchi d'Amico, and with photographers.<sup>10</sup> He took hundreds of photos of streets and houses and markets and bars, he spoke to immigrants and locals. In the two years of preparation for *Rocco*, Visconti carried out a real historical inquest into these neighbourhoods – perhaps a unique research for a film of this kind. It was, as Cecchi d'Amico added, 'an incredible documentation'.<sup>11</sup>

*Rocco and his Brothers* presents us with a complicated series of cities. In fact, I have identified seven different Milans in *Rocco*, some of which contradict or cancel out some of the others. Some of these Milans are visual, others have been identified more from written material, others are purely verbal. A few are a combination of these areas.

#### i Milan as corrupter: darkness at noon

*'We have all become mad while living in this city . . . in one way or another we have all been poisoned.'*

(Simone, version of script)<sup>12</sup>

What is it that destroys the Parondi family, or at the very least the two brothers Simone and Rocco? This was the question at the heart of the film, and one answer is simple – Milan. The family – or those members who 'fail' in the north

– simply cannot cope with the attractions, hardships, values and vices of the big city. However, these values and vices are not represented by the city itself – in any concrete manner – but by the inhabitants of Milan. Above all, the corrupter of Simone and to some extent the whole family is Nadia, the (Cremonese) prostitute who enters their lives at the moment of maximum unity in Milan. Other minor 'corrupting' figures are Morini, the rich boxing entrepreneur who pays Simone for sex, and the Milanese friends of Simone, above all Ivo (a kind of latter-day Iago), who egg him on to commit rape and murder and help him in the former crime.

We need to analyse the various versions of the scripts and the film to get a fuller picture of the corrupting aspects of the city and the way they developed. *Rocco* was an extremely complicated film at the level of script production and rewriting, involving five different writers at various times and tens, if not hundreds, of rewritings of treatments, stories and scripts from 1958 to 1960. In earlier versions of the script, Nadia does *not* appear and the corrupting aspects of the city are much clearer. Nadia is introduced as a kind of device to shift the blame from the city to a woman – or at least to the brothers' reaction to that woman. She becomes the main corrupting influence (albeit greatly toned down and much more sympathetic in the final version of the script), with Milan itself being let off the hook to some extent.<sup>13</sup> As Visconti wrote in notes for the script, Nadia is the 'determining element of the whole tragedy ... the symbol of the corruption'.<sup>14</sup> In any case, it is the combination of the character traits of some of the Parondis – the meekness and commitment to the family of Rocco, the jealousy of Simone, the moral values of their mother Rosaria – that leads to their downfall, not the city itself. The city does not corrupt: it creates the possibility, the landscape, where corruption can take place.

But there are also corrupting aspects within the city. Milan is a place where money is made primarily through violence (boxing or crime), where sex is paid for and used as a commodity, where racism is rife (I will return to this in the section on migration), where housing is available, yes, but only through subterfuge and corruption.

The corruption of Milan is represented by the use of light. Milan is almost invariably seen in the dark or in interiors lit by artificial light. The rape and murder take place at night and dusk respectively. The family arrive at night, wrapped in scarves and cloaks and coats and hats and train smoke, their breath lit up by the cold. The migrants are confused about whether it is night or day.<sup>15</sup> This confusion was intended by the film-makers to symbolize their alienation and shock on reaching the big city.<sup>16</sup> The family's first house is in a basement. The brothers' final meeting is enveloped in fog in the park. The only scenes where the sun breaks out are either outside Milan (the scenes on the lake, at Civitavecchia, and at the building site) or 'above' the city – the Duomo scene. Significantly, there is a stunning burst of light in the final scene shot near the Alfa Romeo factory in beautiful, stark, almost white light. The future is bright, the city is dark and satanic. And this is in contrast with the images we have of the

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south in the film: a land of fresh air, sun and sea – ‘moonbeams and rainbows’, as Rocco puts it – as evidenced by the photographic preparations for the prologue to the film which was never shot (at Matera).

### ii Milan as a foreign country/prison

Milan, for the Parondi family (and hence for the immigrant experience as a whole), sometimes appears as a foreign land – inexplicable and strange. On arrival, they huddle together, alone, on the railway station. Rosaria tells Simone to go and find someone but ‘to return quickly’. So strange is Milan that the migrants cannot even tell night from day. In the opening tram journey, Simone tells Rocco that the shop and street lights make ‘it seem like daytime’. When snow falls overnight, the youngest brother Luca is confused and asks his mother (in the original script) ‘Is it daytime?’ Again, during the opening tram journey, the ticket collector addresses Rosaria as if she is a foreigner. The few explicit racist remarks made towards the Parondis in Milan compare them to foreigners – from an unknown land or ‘Africa’. Visconti, with Rotunno the photographer and his script writers, was trying to see Milan through the eyes of the immigrants – difficult for such a profound Milanese but easier for someone who had only just seen what d’Amico called the ‘incredible’ places where the immigrants lived.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the decision to shoot *Rocco* in black and white had a clear ideological and political justification, as Visconti made plain in an interview in the *Observer* in 1961.<sup>18</sup> ‘Fog or no fog,’ he told a reporter, ‘I am shooting this film in grey. The sun is not useful, it disturbs the film.’<sup>19</sup>

The idea of the city as prison was developed in earlier versions of the script, for example in a sub-plot in which Luca gets lost in Milan’s zoo and releases an animal. In the final film some of these ideas remain. The opening scene is shot through bars as the camera moves down inside the central station, and the first house where the Parondis go is also shot through bars.

### iii L’America: Milan as a land of opportunity

The city is intermittently presented as a land of opportunity, the host for the glittering prizes of the boom. Again, this is hinted at in the opening scene, but also in the snow-raking scene and in other episodes. Rocco and Simone do make it big in the boxing world: Rocco becomes European champion (after originally working in a dry cleaner and, in an earlier script, in a bar) with his poster covering the walls of Milan. In earlier versions of the script both brothers appear regularly in articles in *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, becoming famous in the city and above all in their neighbourhood. Simone is even called *ras* (the Fascist name for a local big-shot) in his quarter.<sup>20</sup>

Rosaria is accepted into the city because of the success of her sons – a clear sign that economic fame can facilitate integration and social assimilation. She is called ‘Signora’ (a far cry from the original ‘Africa’) and treated with respect.<sup>21</sup>

At the celebration party for Rocco's victory (which, of course, is disrupted by tragedy) the whole building participates. Ciro is able to become a worker at Alfa Romeo through hard work and night school (in an earlier version he and Vincenzo buy a lorry and start a business, and Ciro originally works as a petrol-pump attendant). Luca finds odd jobs transporting goods around town. Rosaria cleans for tiny amounts of cash. Yet, within five years (the script has precise dates), the family is installed in a fairly modern apartment with radio and fridge and money is coming in.

Milan is thus a kind of promised land – economically. It does not fail the five brothers in that sense (one brother, Vincenzo, has already found steady work and a house before the film begins). All can find jobs (especially in comparison with the south). There is money out there waiting to be made. Ginetta and her family, immigrants some years earlier, have succeeded, as the surroundings of their house show. But, and here perhaps Visconti betrays his sense of Milanese *operosità* – work ethic – you have to be willing to work hard, to make sacrifices, to be humiliated, to be humble, to be mediocre, to become integrated. And Visconti was accused of having created a typical *petit bourgeois* in Ciro, despite his working-class social position. Integration could also come through more negative activities. There is always money to be found on the dark side of the city, the world of gambling, commercial sex, small crime and violence – here represented by boxing. But even here, life is not easy. Simone is unwilling to work hard even at his boxing; he lacks any kind of Milanese work ethic, despite his protestations, and he is pulled down into the underworld of the bar and the brothel. Nothing is given for nothing in Milan.

Milan is also 'modern' in the sense of its generosity towards the immigrants. A house is provided for the Parondi family, first in a hostel for those evicted from their homes (where Visconti was not given permission to shoot) and later in a working-class estate built under the Piano Romita. As a Milanese builder tells Vincenzo, 'Nobody is left on the streets in Milan'.<sup>22</sup> The city is also an orderly and efficient place, where the snow is cleared off the streets almost immediately.

#### iv and v Centre and periphery in Milan: the 'unknown' Milan

Visconti was fascinated by the Milanese periphery, at least in this period of his creative life. *L'Arielda*, the Testori play he produced soon after *Rocco*, was set entirely in a working-class housing estate on the Milanese periphery with an amazing set designed by Visconti himself. But what kind of periphery is portrayed in *Rocco*? It is the periphery of the black and white photos taken by Visconti on his documentation trips to the city – dark, foggy, empty, flat, smoky. We rarely see crowds or even people going about their daily business. Often the scenes are totally empty – emphasizing the alienation of the urban periphery. This is true of the famous fight scene. Again, the only time we see the

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periphery 'populated' (sparsely), it is by workers in their lunch break from Alfa Romeo.

How 'realistic' was this portrayal? If we compare some photos taken of workers – on strike – at the nearby FACE factory in 1955 (see Illustration 1) with the final scene of the film, the similarity is striking. Visconti had not stripped the periphery of people: in these new neighbourhoods, at night, *that was how it was*. By day, the story was different, as children played in the streets and women shopped. But by night, and we only see the periphery at night, this was how it was. Bleak, empty, flat, dead.

A brief comparison with one of the few films to feature the Milanese periphery before Visconti is also instructive. Vittorio De Sica's *Miracolo a Milano*, released in 1951, also shows an empty city, for example in the opening funeral scene. However, De Sica's periphery is, in general, very different to that of Visconti. It is a shanty-town periphery only populated by the very poor and destitute and homeless, a kind of countryside filled with cardboard boxes. But it is populated and lively – a real semi-community exists there. When De Sica shows the centre of Milan it is only to contrast it with this periphery, as in the scene where Totò comes across La Scala by chance. When Visconti shows the



*Illustration 1* Workers on strike from the FACE factory in Milan, 1955. Archivio del Camera del Lavoro di Milano.

centre of town, it is for aesthetic reasons (the Duomo scene) and never as a specific contrast with the periphery, except perhaps in the opening scene. De Sica's Milanese periphery is pre-boom and pre-mass immigration – its inhabitants are mainly Milanese tramps. Visconti's periphery is that of the boom and immigration – its inhabitants are mainly southerners.

Many critics praised Visconti for having shown an 'unknown' Milan, a hidden city, the dark side of the 'capital of the miracle'. *Avanti!* called *Rocco* a film 'which destroys the myth of the big city of general progress and well-being'.<sup>23</sup> *L'Unità* claimed that *Rocco* had revealed the 'dark zones of our social and civil life' and had 'uncovered what was rotten'. Undoubtedly, the peripheral Milan of *Rocco* had never made it onto the big screen before, and Visconti himself had been shocked by what he had seen in these neighbourhoods. In this sense, at least, the Milan of *Rocco and his brothers* was 'unknown'. Whether the film revealed anything about the real lives of the people who lived in these areas is another matter. I deal in more detail with this question in the section on migration.

#### vi Milan and *la nebbia*: fog and the city

The relationship between fog (*la nebbia*), Milan and the Milanese is a fascinating one. One candidate standing for mayor in the local elections of 1997 was described as having 'fog in his lungs' to underline his Milanese roots. In his novel *La vita agra*, Luciano Bianciardi tried to dissect the relationship between fog and the Milanese:

they call it fog, they treasure it, they show it to you, they glory in it as a local product. And it is a local product. But it is not fog . . . it is if anything an angry fumigation, a flatulence of men, of motors, of chimneys, of sweat, of smelly feet, of dust shaken up by the secretaries, the whores, the representatives, the graphic designers.<sup>24</sup>

One constant between De Sica and Visconti is the use of fog as a kind of trademark of the city. In De Sica's film the inhabitants of the shanty-town huddle together under the beams of sunlight which penetrate the fog. In Visconti the fog envelops the periphery, and the park when the brothers meet to discuss the fate of Simone. In both, the fog takes on an unreal quality. De Sica does this deliberately, as the whole film is characterized by a magical-realist style.

In *Rocco*, the fog was unreal, Visconti having to create artificial *nebbia* because none was 'naturally' available. And despite fog only appearing in one scene, reviewers of *Rocco* made constant reference to the foggy periphery. In one of the earlier scripts, Ginetta asks Rosaria 'What do you think of Milan and the fog?' A description of Rosaria's unease in the city talks about 'that sea of thick and famous fog which limits her view to a few metres from the house'. Other passages describe 'streets immersed in fog' and the countryside around Milan being 'a single compact block of fog'.<sup>25</sup> It would be interesting to delve deeper

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into the psyche of a city whose identity seems to be defined, physically, by its *inability to be seen*, by its very meteorological invisibility.

### vii Milan as boomtown: the 'capital of the miracle'

*'Who are all these people? They can't have been born rich!'*

(Simone, version of script)<sup>26</sup>

*'Surely we don't have to work like animals here as well, running here and there for the whole day.'*

(Simone, version of script)<sup>27</sup>

When Left journalists and commentators wrote about the economic miracle in Italy in the early 1960s, they almost always added a 'so-called' or put quotation marks around the two words.<sup>28</sup> It is thus interesting to try and tease out the aspects of the miracle which are present in *Rocco*. First, there are the 'land of opportunity' pointers which I discussed earlier. Second, there is some feeling of a society in movement, of a 'great transformation' taking place not just in Milan but in the whole of Italy. It is conveyed by the bright lights of the city, the cars, the 'modernity of Nadia', the mass migration (almost all the spectators at Simone's first big fight are from the south), the building works, the television in Morini's flat. Milan in these brief flashes is clearly the 'capital of the miracle'. Yet these pointers were much more explicit in the earlier versions of the script – in some Vincenzo is working on the line 1 of the *metropolitana milanese* – real symbol of the miracle at Milan (which finally opened in 1964). In others the brothers openly marvel at the skyscrapers on arrival, counting the storeys, in a pre-echo of the Communist Party propaganda film *Il prezzo del miracolo*, made in 1963. In fact, there are great similarities between these earlier versions and this 1963 film, especially the opening scene.<sup>29</sup>

There are many traditional Milan sites in the film which have little connection with the boom or modernity, however. This is true both of the locations used – the Duomo and the Parco Sempione above all – but also of the only really 'modern Milanese' brothers in the film, Ciro and Vincenzo. Both find jobs in Milan. Both take part in the miracle. But both are largely passive, essentially mediocre characters who fail to make their mark on the film. And even in the most 'modern' moment of the film, when Ciro returns to Alfa Romeo as the siren sounds, there are strong elements of tradition and even nostalgia.<sup>30</sup> The choice of Alfa Romeo (with its Viscontian symbol and its long Milanese tradition – the first factory was opened in the 1890s) hardly smacks of an industry closely linked to the 'miracle'. Even the choice of actual factory – the instantly recognizable Portello plant – is a backward step. Far from being at the vanguard of modernity – the boom saw industry move *en masse* from Milan to the hinterland – the Portello plant itself was already being

run down as *Rocco* was filmed and the last workers were shifted to Arese, well out of the city, in 1964–5.

In truth, we get little idea of the Milan of the miracle from *Rocco*. The action is concentrated within the family and not within the city. The working class makes a fleeting appearance.<sup>31</sup> The proletariat is lumpen, not industrial. Work itself appears only fleetingly and exceptionally, as with the snow-clearing sequence. Other work is more 'old-fashioned' and hardly linked to economic development – boxing, training, prostitution, gambling. Although it is set in 1955–60, there is no real reason why *Rocco* could not have been set in 1895–1900 (as was Monicelli's *I compagni!* (1963), set in Turin). After all, southern migrants had been arriving in the north for decades. Only the new urban peripheral landscape gives us a real idea of how the city had changed, or was changing under the weight of the miracle. There is little great transformation in *Rocco*. It is, in many ways, and ironically given the intense historical and sociological research put into its production, a period piece, a timeless study of disintegration and urbanization. This conclusion is strengthened by a glance at the many literary influences which Visconti used for the film – from the Bible to Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers* to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* to Verga. The only 'modern' pieces used were Testori's stories which, arguably, described a premodern lumpenproletariat unconnected with the nerve centres of the boom.

#### viii Seven Milans

What is the significance of these 'many Milans' in *Rocco*? Above all, the complicated nature of the representation of the city in the film makes any one-dimensional approach to *Rocco* problematic. Visconti was not interested *only* in a fictional 'unknown' Milan, or merely in presenting a negative image of his home town. In fact, he views and films Milan at a number of different levels and is unsure about his real opinion on the city: generous or hostile? welcoming or racist? dynamic or traditional? Milan was all of these, and this dialectic can be most clearly drawn out with an analysis of the most central theme in the film – migration.

### 4 *Rocco* and migration

#### i Visconti and Testori

At a fairly advanced stage in the development of *Rocco*, Visconti came across the work of the writer Giovanni Testori, and especially his collection of short stories *Il ponte della Ghisolfi*. After discussions with his fellow writers he decided to substitute two episodes – 'Rocco' and 'Simone' – with extracts from these stories, particularly two pieces entitled 'Cosa fai, Sinatra?' and 'Il Brianza'. Testori was also called in to correct the Milanese dialogues in the final script. The influence of Testori's stories is twofold: first, there is a direct relationship

between Testori's work and the plot of the film. In particular, the most controversial and powerful scene in the film – the rape scene – is lifted straight from Testori right down to some of the dialogue. Morini's character is also based on a Testori story. Second, the whole environment of Testori superimposed itself onto the *Rocco* plot and script. Testori was interested in the milieu of the Milanese underworld, the lumpenproletariat, the racism, violence and sex of the forgotten people at the bottom of Milanese society, in the ghettos and what the press called the 'jungles' and 'casbahs' of Bovisa, Via MacMahon, Giambellino, Lambrate, Porta Genova. Testori's world – at that time – was one of violence, sex, betrayal, racism and ambition, in the twilight fog-bound world of the Milanese periphery where city merged with countryside and courting couples congregated in the undergrowth around the new housing estates.

Visconti was later to take this world to its extreme in the theatrical production of *L'Aiada*, but in *Rocco* he allowed himself to be influenced in a far more subtle way by Testori – a way which was nonetheless decisive for the whole thrust of the story and its emphasis away from the productive heart of the city and the miracle and towards the edges, the debris of the boom. Even when modernity is represented, it is in an archaic way. In one scene a television in Morini's luxurious pad is on but (apparently for technical reasons) is 'showing' a static Renaissance painting on its screen.

## ii Stereotypes and crime

*'Everybody shouts, threatens, swears.'*

(Piero Lorenzoni)<sup>32</sup>

*'I am of Milan.'*

(Luchino Visconti)<sup>33</sup>

How is migration represented in *Rocco*? How are the migrants represented? Here we come up against perhaps the most crucial questions facing the film and its critics from both Left and Right. *Rocco* is a film 'about' migration, 'about' specifically southern migrants, so this is where the political and social thrust of the work stands or falls. I believe it is here that the failure of the film – not artistic failure but political failure in what Visconti himself was trying to do – is greatest. *Rocco*, very simply, *reinforces and reinforced the stereotypes and the racism about and towards southern immigrants in the north in the 1950s and 1960s.*

What was the content of these stereotypes and this racism?<sup>34</sup> For northerners who constructed them or merely reproduced them, these stereotypes were as follows: southerners were backward, lazy, dirty, passionate, 'lively', bound by antique codes of honour and family ties, violent, loud, sexually potent and yet sexually backward, and criminals. These stereotypes were reinforced by the reporting of the popular and quality press, which ran a long hate campaign against southern immigrants and persisted in linking regional origins to criminal

activity. *Rocco and his Brothers* reinforced these stereotypes.<sup>35</sup> Simone, the central southern character in the film, fulfilled all these criteria: he was hot-blooded, rather stupid, a thief, violent, lazy,<sup>36</sup> a ladies' man who could not cope with northern women, someone willing to sell his body for money when desperate, a gambler, a jealous rapist and a brutal and cowardly murderer. He gained five stars in the stereotype competition – he was a Lombrosian dream.

Rosaria also hit a fair amount of stereotypical bull's-eyes as the Southern Mother or Widow. She was hysterical, possessive, jealous, loud, quick to take offence, excessive in her mourning, anti-modern in the extreme and obsessive about family unity to the detriment of all other values (religious, moral or otherwise). The decision to cast Rosina Paxinou – an impressive but extremely theatrical Greek actor given to overplaying – as Rosaria was criticized at the time and appears a mistake even today, especially in the melodramatic last scene.<sup>37</sup> I am arguing not that Visconti dealt explicitly or simplistically in stereotypes (although he came closest with the characters of Simone and Rosaria) but that in the context of the time and of widespread use of these forms of discourse, the film itself reinforced prevailing attitudes in the north towards southern immigrants. To some extent, the story of the film – dominated by Simone – reproduced the dominant ideas about the activities and characters of the 'terroni' in the north. Finally, the decision to use migrants from Basilicata (the older term *Lucania* is used in the film), the most 'backward' and isolated (and small) southern region, also helped this process.

Some critics, from Left and Right, put their heads over the parapet in 1960 and made these points, often in milder form than I have done. In addition, some Catholic and right-wing politicians attacked *Rocco* as 'an insult for all the rural labourers of the south, who emigrated so as to be able to eat'.<sup>38</sup> For these 'critics', who represented a certain strand of middle-class and popular opinion in the south, *Rocco* pigeon-holed southerners as hot-blooded rapists and criminals. Left critics and others accused Visconti of having little knowledge of the south (despite having made *La terra trema*) and of Lucania/Basilicata in particular.<sup>39</sup> Pasolini wrote that *Rocco and his brothers* were 'mannerist southerners ... schematic characters ... [we have] the conformist easily influenced by ideology (Vincenzo), the sensual disturbed one (Simone) and the mystic (Rocco)'.<sup>40</sup> Other Left critics agreed: one wrote that 'today, mothers like those represented by Visconti no longer exist, and even if they do, they are part of the past'.<sup>41</sup> 'The personalities are schematic ... the public laughs [during the final scene]'.<sup>42</sup> The critic Rino Dal Sasso made a similar point: 'southerners are no longer like those described in this film, knives are no longer used in the south ... Visconti does not know much about the world of the southern poor and he does not look very kindly on what he does know'.<sup>43</sup>

Visconti himself appeared to provide support for some of these points with his comments on the film. He wrote that one of his aims in *Rocco* was to explore 'an aspect of the Southern character that strikes me as extremely important: the passions, laws and taboos of honour'.<sup>44</sup> 'If it ends in a crime it is because this is

typical of the southern mentality where there are certain taboos, particularly in relation to love'.<sup>45</sup> This conception of a particular 'southern' mentality (and appearance) is clearer from the many versions of the scripts and treatments in the Visconti archive. Visconti's idea of a special southern 'mentality' appeared to reflect a descent into stereotype in his own mind – not surprising given his hyper-Milanese background. However, his critics were upset not so much by the supposed use of stereotypes – because they were *stereotypes* – but because they no longer reflected a supposedly transformed south. This (wishful?) point is harder to prove or disprove. Perhaps it is easier to add that Visconti was not alone in drawing on these supposed 'southern' characteristics: a whole series of films picked up on these themes in the early 1960s – some for comic reasons (Germi's *Divorzio all'italiano*) others in a much more artistic vein (Antonioni's *L'avventura*). The scene in the latter film where Monica Vitti is alone in a Sicilian town, surrounded by dark, threatening southern men, is perhaps no less damning of these 'values' than *Rocco* itself, which at least tries to present an alternative to the crimes of Simone.

How 'typical' was the story of *Rocco and his brothers*? For Visconti and his co-writers, the tale could have been gleaned from any newspaper.<sup>46</sup> Visconti claimed that 'all the personalities in the film are taken from reality' and that 'the story of *Rocco* could be taken from almost any newspaper'.<sup>47</sup> It was one story 'among many'.<sup>48</sup> 'In making *Rocco*', wrote Visconti, 'I wanted to give to the personalities in the film ... the historical character typical of the moment in which we are living'.<sup>49</sup> Visconti cited actual cases and trials in the notes upon which the earlier scripts were based and added: 'that which is important in these events is all in the *cronaca nera*'.<sup>50</sup> He was looking to create 'a contemporary drama'.<sup>51</sup> *L'Ariada*, the play set on the Milanese periphery directed by Visconti shortly after *Rocco*, was set 'in Milan, today'.<sup>52</sup> *Rocco*'s script was dated and finished in 1960, the year of the film's release.

Certainly, some of the episodes *were* inspired by real-life events – notably the murder of Nadia at the lake (in fact, a prostitute, referred to in the press as a 'mondana' or 'passeggiatrice', Paola Del Bono, had been murdered there in March 1959 and her naked body had been found at the water's edge).<sup>53</sup> But the other key – violent – episodes were not: the post-boxing 'fight' was almost certainly an invention, and the rape scene (and Morini episode) had their roots not in the *cronaca* of the local press but in the stories published by Testori. A quite surreal moment was created by the speech given, in parliament, by the under-secretary at the Entertainment Ministry, Semararo, in 1960. According to this junior Minister, the rape scene was wholly unrealistic, a misrepresentation of the southern mentality. 'Within southern families, because of their "natural education", it is possible that a murder can be committed: but a brother would never take away his brother's woman with the help of others. This is an exaltation of rape and violence'.<sup>54</sup>

In reality, and despite all his research on the living conditions and housing and habitat of the southern immigrants at Milan, the story of Simone and Rocco

and Nadia was not typical but a horrific exception. The story of Vincenzo, Ciro and Luca was much more 'typical', but much more mundane and hardly able to bear the weight of the melodrama which Visconti wanted to impose upon the film. In this sense, the claim that the film was 'everyday', 'normal' and 'typical' was a misrepresentation both of the film itself and its origins (literary as well as, if not much more than, historical).<sup>55</sup> The claims to 'typicality' were false ones although the film itself later became a 'typical' part of the debates and discourse involving migration and the fate of migrants.

But what about the Milanese? Stereotypes work best in pairs – and the lazy southerner cliché was best matched with a hard-working northerner.<sup>56</sup> Here the film does less to reinforce than to deny. It is ambivalent. Some of the Milanese we meet seem hard-working (Cecchi, the boxing trainer; the other boxers; the old builder who helps Vincenzo with advice about the house; the ticket collector; Ciro's girlfriend) but others are corrupt (Morini), corruptible (the dry cleaning shop owner) or just scum (Ivo and his pals). In fact, we meet very few Milanese at all – for a film almost entirely set in Milan. After his visits to some ghetto-like neighbourhoods on the urban periphery, Visconti believed that the southerners stayed among southerners. The only 'Milanese' to have any real impact is Nadia – and she is from Cremona. In the original scripts, Nadia was a far more evil character than she eventually appeared. But there are stereotypical aspects about her character nonetheless – the 'whore with the heart of gold' (so common to Italian melodrama and film, from *Le notti di Cabiria* to *Accattone* to Silvana Magnano's character in *La grande guerra* and Girardot again in *I compagni*) coupled with the 'easy' northern woman, the liberated, beautiful damsel in distress who entraps the stupid southern man. Yet here the stereotypes are not at all positive, and therefore lose their force as stereotypes. Without the positive twins to the negative Simone or Nadia the unintended reinforcement of racist and prejudicial ideas about southerners was bound to be weakened, unless, of course, those positive stereotypes were already deeply embedded in the minds of the audiences and 'public' of the time. Some indications from 1960 would imply that they were.

Of course, Simone and Rosaria are not the whole story, and other characters certainly do not reinforce these stereotypes – Rocco above all, but also the hard-working and unpassionate brothers Ciro and Vincenzo. At one point Ciro praises some colleagues as 'good people, real Milanese'.<sup>57</sup> But Ciro and Vincenzo are undoubtedly minor characters in the film. As one friend warned Visconti upon reading a later version of the script, 'the Nadia-Simone-Rocco story eats up everything else'.<sup>58</sup> All the dramatic force and the tension become concentrated in these three characters; the most powerful scenes (and the most talked-about scenes – the rape, the fight, the murder, the party) all involve Simone, Rocco and Nadia. This is where the force of the film lies and where the audience is most involved.

*Rocco and his Brothers* is remembered, among the vast majority of those who have seen it, for the tragic saga of Simone, Rocco and Nadia. Its 'historical role'

is there, thereby ignoring the millions of southerners who did 'make it' in the north, who built the miracle with their blood and sweat, who bucked the stereotypes and lived quiet unexceptional lives on the grey peripheries.

Perhaps the strongest stereotype present in the film is that of the Southern Family. Here we have a fatherless family with all the characteristics traditionally applied to its southern variant – gross insularity, loyalty, an excessive sense of unity.<sup>59</sup> This is the 'amoral family' identified by the American sociologist Edward Banfield in Lucania in the 1950s – a family unit only interested in the well-being of its members to the detriment of all other objectives.<sup>60</sup> However, this is also an 'amoral family' gone wrong. Two of the brothers, *Ciro* and *Vincenzo*, have a much weaker idea of the family than the others. *Vincenzo* leaves home after his military service and settles in Milan. He then leaves again to live with his wife. *Ciro* stays at home but chooses a higher morality than family loyalty when *Simone* is in trouble, actually deciding to denounce him to the police for murder.<sup>61</sup> So we are left with three adherents to 'amoral familism' – *Rosaria*, *Rocco* and *Simone*. *Simone*, if he is an 'amoral familist', goes about it in a very strange way. First, he gets *Rocco* sacked by seducing and stealing from his boss. Then he rapes *Nadia* in front of *Rocco* and beats him up. Later he takes *Nadia* to live in the family home and then steals from *Morini*, forcing *Rocco* to box on against his will to pay off his huge debts. He appears impervious to the feelings of either *Rosaria* or *Rocco* (or the other brothers apart from the youngest *Luca*).

So we are now left with two possible extreme familists.<sup>62</sup> *Rocco's* fatalistic familism ('you are my brother, what can I do?')<sup>63</sup> is really only apparent in his extreme loyalty to *Simone*, to the detriment of all the other brothers, himself and above all *Nadia*. His familism is really a 'brotherism', tied up with complicated and antiquated codes of honour towards women which lead him to urge *Nadia* to return to the man who brutally raped her. Finally, then, the only real familist is *Rosaria* – and here the evidence is strong enough. For *Rosaria* the family – above all family unity – is the most important value ('I will be happy only when we are all together around this table. Five united like the fingers of one hand')<sup>64</sup>. On arrival in Milan she brandishes a photo of *Vincenzo*. She then admonishes him for no longer mourning their father. By sheer will power, she keeps the family together, sending them off to work in the happiest scene in the film when the snow falls in the city. Outsiders (especially women) are treated as enemies – as intruders – with great suspicion. She disapproves of *Vincenzo's* marriage and refuses to attend the christening of her first grandchild (and even to see the child or its mother for some time). She treats *Nadia* with hostility. She criticizes *Ciro* for not appearing at an Easter dinner.<sup>65</sup> But her 'familism' is also tempered by favouritism – in favour of *Simone*, her preferred son. This choice is made clear in the penultimate scene when *Simone* returns covered in blood. *Rosaria* attacks *Ciro* for wanting to go to the police, striking him in the face and excommunicating him from the treasured family unit.<sup>66</sup> He is only allowed home after his impassioned final speech. It is hardly true that, as

Tonetti has written, 'the unity of the family is the supreme value to be maintained at any cost'. The only real 'supreme value' is the presence of Simone within the family for which Rocco, Vincenzo and Ciro, at various times, are sacrificed.<sup>67</sup>

But what is specifically 'southern' about this familism which seems to apply merely to Rosaria, and not in any clear way?<sup>68</sup> Here again Visconti comes close to stereotype. Yes, familism has been a strong feature of contemporary Italian society but it is by no means a specifically southern phenomenon. My own research on Milan in the 1950s has identified strong signs of familism among immigrants and Milanese families – economically, socially and culturally. By the 1960s television, consumerism and wholesale changes in leisure activities were beginning to filter down to the working classes of the city. In addition, immigrant families appear as often less familist than natives of Milan.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, familism, even that weaker form found in the Parondi family, was not especially or necessarily 'southern'.

Finally, although there are flashes of anti-familism in the film, for example when Nadia rails against the decisions of Rocco and Simone ('have you been given permission by your little brother?')<sup>70</sup> or when Simone rebels against his brothers ('are these the decisions of the Brothers' court?')<sup>71</sup>, any real 'denunciation' of the conventional family is tempered by Visconti's own traditional view of the family.<sup>72</sup>

### iii Racism and ethnicity in *Rocco*

*'We also have our racists.'*

(Luchino Visconti, 1960)<sup>73</sup>

*'Can't you understand that we're not in Lucania anymore?'*

(Ginetta, Vincenzo's girlfriend, to Vincenzo, *Rocco and his Brothers*)<sup>74</sup>

Racism rears its ugly head – explicitly – on only a few occasions in the film. Visconti was to explore the content of racism against southerners in Milan in much more explicit detail in his production of Testori's play *L'Arielda*, his first work after *Rocco*.<sup>75</sup> As for the film, there are only a few specific racist 'moments'. I have picked out five. First, there is the short conversation between a door-keeper and her friend as the Parondis reach their first home.

DOOR-KEEPER. Good morning Maria.

FRIEND. My God, did you see that?

DOOR-KEEPER. Africa!

FRIEND. But . . . where do they come from?

DOOR-KEEPER. Lu – can – ia.

FRIEND. Lu-can-ia, where is this Lucania?

DOOR-KEEPER. [laughing]. Oh yes, down, down, right down at the bottom ... yes, yes, really 'Terra di primavera' [singing].<sup>76</sup>

In one earlier version of the script, the door-keepers also added 'here, at the INA [a name related to certain housing complexes] if they are not really *brown-faced*, they are not given a house'.<sup>77</sup> Visconti makes his characters repeat the 'where is Lucania?' line twice in the film, underlining the supposed chasm between Milanese and southern immigrants. A second racist moment appears with Rosaria's comments about Nadia, which also refer to skin texture if not colour ('pallid ... it is really ugly skin. Skin from here').<sup>78</sup> Third, there are the laughter and comments ('where is Lucania?') of the other boxers concerning the attire of Rocco and Simone in the gym. Fourth, the *rissa* between groups of southerners at Simone's first big fight. Fifth, the boxing trainer Cecchi's unscripted rant in his office. A long racist speech was included in earlier versions of the script, but cut out of the final published version.<sup>79</sup> The classic racist classification of southerners (and other immigrants) at Milan – 'terroni!' – is repeated four times in the film.<sup>80</sup>

What can we conclude from these incidents in *Rocco*? First, that racism is not the main 'theme' of the film. These incidents are few and far between, and most are partly played for laughs. Second, the racism 'suffered' by the immigrants is not of a direct kind. That is, there is no face-to-face insulting of the Parondis. Most of the comments are in asides or of a kind connected more with disdain towards poverty (as in the gym scene) than specifically towards southerners. Finally, this racism is not violent. The only violent racist incident is that involving people from Lucania at Simone's first big bout. Thus, it would be fair to conclude that Visconti plays down the racism aspect in the film (especially in contrast with some of the earlier versions of scripts and treatments) and moves the whole issue of racism away from centre-stage. It is nonetheless useful to try and draw out some of the more subtle aspects of 'race' in *Rocco*. How can we tell the Parondis are from the south? By the music that is playing on their arrival, by their attitude to the city and, in the central station, by their attire, especially that of Rosaria.<sup>81</sup> But there are more interesting ways we can tell: by their (largely dubbed) speech (the accents and the dialects) and, more controversially, by their appearance. Visconti chose only two Italian actors among the six of the Parondi family. Why? Certainly for production reasons but also for aesthetic reasons. Some of the Parondis 'look' southern. Rosaria was played by a Greek actress (some critics referred to the 'Greekness' of Lucania<sup>82</sup>), Max Cartier, playing *Ciro*, was from Corsica and Luca is portrayed by an actor actually from the south. Franciosa, one of the script writers on *Rocco*, later claimed that a 'Rosaria' on whom the character of the mother was based 'was very similar, in terms of a precise ethnic substance, to the Rosaria in our film'.<sup>83</sup> In a way, Visconti employed a kind of racial selection in choosing some of the actors (many of them virtually unknown) for *Rocco*. As already mentioned, Rosaria also makes an explicit reference to skin colour in her attack on Nadia early on in the film. The

southerner who fights Simone is described in one of the original scripts as 'dark and stocky, much shorter . . . all muscles' (although in the film he doesn't appear in this way). Another man is referred to as 'evidently a southerner'.<sup>84</sup>

Can we therefore conclude that the film 'racializes' the north-south divide? Certainly, this whole issue is a complicated and difficult one which requires further research on the origins of racial and ethnic stereotypes in Italy with particular reference to the south. The idea of physical differences between southerners and northerners remains deep within Italian everyday discourse – despite having little basis in reality. The fact that some of the brothers look more 'southern' than others perhaps confirms a more casual choice (aesthetically) by Visconti. Rocco and Vincenzo are decidedly outside any stereotypical categorization physically, and the only truly 'southern' faces are those of Ciro, Luca and Rosaria. In fact, the use of racial stereotypes is much less obvious in *Rocco* than in, for example, *I compagni* where the Sicilian migrant is small and dark, and even wears a kind of hood which makes him look like an Arab in one scene. He is called 'Mustafa' and 'Beduino' by his fellow workers.

Finally, I would like to return to the only violent 'racist' scene in the film – the fight after the boxing match among southerners. This scene has left me with a number of questions. First, did Visconti base it on a real-life incident? I have found no record of such a fight in either the Visconti archives or my research into migration to Milan during the 1960s (and there is a lot of evidence of violent incidents between northerners and southerners on almost a daily basis). Second, if it was an imagined incident, why did Visconti choose to depict violence between southerners, with one group accusing the other of 'betrayal' of Lucania? In the script but not the film a real racist speech is put into the mouth of 'a man from Lucania': 'and you lot what race are you? You have denied your own past! You still stink of the train . . . Go back home!!'<sup>85</sup>

The bizarreness of the whole scene draws one to the obvious conclusion that Visconti was trying to make a point of some kind here, a very simple point – that Simone has lost touch with his roots and become alienated from his own 'community' (in one of the original scripts Simone expresses pride in fighting for a Milanese trainer; in another Rocco fights for Italy). The integrated/non-integrated divide could be as important as traditional 'ethnic' or 'regional' origins.

Despite its popular image and the way it has entered into the Italian imagination, the movie does not depict any really harsh treatment of the Parondis by the Milanese. On the contrary, they are given a house and become fairly well integrated into the city and its milieu. The destruction of the family and of Simone and Rocco can be put down, in Visconti's vision, not to the Milanese or to racism but to their own characters and mistakes, the excessively 'southern' character traits of Simone and the excessive saintliness of Rocco, combined with the exaggerated ideal of the family adhered to by Rosaria. Nevertheless, the broad sweep of the film drew audiences to the conclusion that it was the city, or the abandonment of the village, which precipitated the

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tragedy of the Parondi family. The virtuous unity of the southern family disintegrated in the north.

Language plays an important part in distinguishing the Lucanians and southerners from their Milanese co-citizens. The southerners have strong accents and often speak in dialect, the Milanese have their own dialect ('corrected' by Testori). Milanese-northern words and phrases are often used in the film – 'mouvess', 'pirla' and so on. In some original versions this was underlined with more intensity, as when Simone asks what 'piccinina' (a Milanese word for small child) means.<sup>86</sup> Many critics have picked up on the symbolic nature of Ciriaco 'forgetting' his dialect in the party scene as a sign of his full integration into Milanese life. Vincenzo chides him for 'not knowing his own language any more'.<sup>87</sup> Some of the script writers claimed that this loss of dialect (and imitation of a new dialect) was a sign of the suffering imposed by mass migration. Vincenzo, in this way, 'carried his experience of exile with him every day'.<sup>88</sup> Finally, the opening scene, with its repetitions on the trams and the addition of question marks, shows how it is not language alone that divides southerners and northerners, but much deeper social and cultural characteristics.

TICKET COLLECTOR. Capolinea ...

ROSARIA. Capolinea?

TICKET COLLECTOR. Lambrate ...

ROSARIA. Lambrate?

ROSARIA. Mio figlio ...

TICKET COLLECTOR. Suo figlio?

As Brunetta has written, 'the repetition of the words is a sign of an absolute estrangement between the two worlds, of the nearly galactic distance between them ... to communicate they are reduced to single words, gestures, photographs'.<sup>89</sup>

Visconti insisted in interviews that he was also trying, in *Rocco*, to illuminate the lack of communicability between north and south. He often spoke of 'two worlds'. In addition, he was convinced from his own research that most southerners remained 'with' (physically and culturally) their compatriots in the big city, thereby restricting the possibility of integration, linguistic or otherwise.<sup>90</sup> The 'economic miracle' saw a 'linguistic revolution' sweep across Italy as mass communications took hold in even the remotest corners of the globe. Four million Italians were on the move, and not just within Italy. A 'linguistic mobility' began to destroy the dialect-based cultural forms of the 1940s and before. To cite Brunetta, 'for the first time entire groups of southern dialect speakers were faced with northern dialects and the first impact was a traumatic one, even at the level of the most simple communication'.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

*Rocco e i suoi fratelli* was a key film of the boom years – perhaps the most important in terms of its role in creating and recreating historical memory. Time and again, when reference is made to the ‘economic miracle’, the mass internal migrations of that time are described in terms of Visconti’s film, as if we were dealing with a straightforward documentary. In reality, the film was a far more complicated and contradictory affair than it has since been painted. Visconti’s extraordinary cultural and political world-view created a vivid fresco of images and stories which intersected with the boom, the city, migration, politics and sex. The city appears as a series of different arenas and metaphors – at times hyper-realistic, at times theatrical – against which the drama is played out. While trying to make a film in favour of the plight of southerners in Milan, Visconti produced a story which appeared to combine all the worst elements of public (Milanese) fears about mass immigration – sexual violence, excessive familism, murder and a weak work ethic. The Left found itself in real difficulty with the actual content of the film and was only too happy to find itself dealing with an anti-censorship battle with the state which deflected attention from *Rocco* itself. While trying to condemn racism, Visconti’s film probably reinforced prejudiced views among those who held them. Torn as ever between his political beliefs and his artistic sensibilities, Visconti allowed the melodrama to dominate the ‘denuncia’. The power of the film remains intact, even today, but the time which has passed since the boom allows us to see the film for what it really was and is, and to detach it, at last, from the political and social traumas of the ‘economic miracle’.

## Notes

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- 1 ‘Gli incassi non battono quelli della “Dolce vita”’, *Corriere Lombardo*, 17–18 October 1960.
- 2 Ironically, Gianni Amelio’s interesting but flawed film *Così ridevano* – a work inspired by *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* which opens up many of the debates cited in this article – won the Golden Lion at Venice in 1998.
- 3 I have dealt with the censorship battles over *Rocco* and the attitude of the Left towards the film in a separate paper, ‘La gente e il buon costume. Luchino Visconti’s *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, censorship and the left in Italy, 1960–1961’. Unpublished research paper.
- 4 For the debates over realism, neorealism and critical realism relating to *Rocco* and to other Visconti films see P. Baldelli, *I film di Luchino Visconti* (Manduria ed., Lacvita, 1965), p. 193ff.; in G. Aristarco, ‘Esperienza culturale ed esperienza originale in

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- Luchino Visconti', G. Aristarco and G. Carancini (eds) *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, 2nd edn (Milan: Cappelli editore, 1960), pp. 13–47; Claretta Tonetti, *Luchino Visconti* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), pp. 88–92; S. Rohdie, *Rocco and his Brothers* (*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*) (London: BFI, 1992).
- 5 See for example the long 'referendum' on censorship in the *Corriere d'Informazione*, 17 November–1 December 1960.
  - 6 *Corriere della Sera*, 28 October 1960.
  - 7 Guido Crainz, *Storia del miracolo italiano. Culture, identità, trasformazioni fra anni cinquanta e sessanta* (Rome: Progetti Donzelli, 1996), p. 142.
  - 8 In 1960, ninety-four all-Italian films and sixty-six co-productions were made. In that year 744 million spectators viewed films in Italy; see G. Nowell-Smith, *The Companion to Italian Cinema* (London: BFI, 1996).
  - 9 Archivio Visconti, C26-005227.
  - 10 See the photographs in the Archivio Visconti. There are 144 photographs of Milan in C-26-004999-5107 and another forty-four in C26-006131-74. These photographs are important historical as well as artistic documents. Suso Cecchi d'Amico talked of 'going to see the incredible houses where the southerners lived' (F. Faldini and G. Fofi (eds) *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981), p. 24).
  - 11 *ibid.* It is worth noting that the incredible set designed by Visconti for *L'Arielda*, the play which he directed immediately after *Rocco*, was clearly based on some of these photographs. For a photo of the set see Caterina D'Amico and Renzo Renzi (eds) *Luchino Visconti. Il mio teatro*, vol. 2: 1954–1976 (Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1979), pp. 238–50.
  - 12 'Alcune pagine del copione', Archivio Visconti, 69–101, C26-004895.
  - 13 Nadia entered the script process as a much more calculating character than in the filmed version. It is explicitly stated that it is Nadia's fault that 'Simone starts to steal' and she tells him to his face that 'if he wants her company he must pay her like all her other "clients"' ('Soggetto', Archivio Visconti, C26-004850. Even the Idroscalo murder is blamed on the provocative behaviour of Nadia, and our sympathies are supposed to lie with Simone (*ibid.*, p. 16). This is maintained in later versions, where 'Nadia ... teaches Simone the lowest and most immoral ways of living and the ways in which people's desires can be exploited' ('3 copie su personaggio di Nadia', Archivio Visconti, C26-004862–63). For the treatment of women in *Rocco*, see Baldelli, *I film di Luchino Visconti*, pp. 207–8; G. Aristarco, *Cinema italiano 1960. Romanzo e antiromanzo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961), pp. 71–2; Rohdie, *Rocco and his Brothers*, pp. 64–7. In some of the original treatments, a strong part was given to a character called Imma, Simone's ex-girlfriend from Lucania who follows him to Milan expecting marriage and becomes a prostitute. In some versions she drowns herself in the *navigli* in desperation.
  - 14 'Trascrizione di registrazione in preparazione dal soggetto', 2 copie, Archivio Visconti, C26-004851. Visconti warned against this being too straightforward, against the girl having 'a card attached to her with the words: I am the corruptor ... the corruption can be much more subtle'. Nadia should 'not be too evil ... if she should be a symbol of the city'. Later in the same set of notes he appears to change his mind, adding that 'it must be something that comes from the fact of living at Milan ... it is the city which ruins them [the southerners]' ('3 copie su personaggio di Nadia', Archivio Visconti, C26-004862–63).
  - 15 This is repeated (in the script) after the snow fall when Luca asks 'is it day or night?' (Aristarco and Carancini, 'La sceneggiatura', *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, p. 78).
  - 16 See also the description of the tram journey (Trattamenti, Archivio Visconti, C26-004876).

- 17 For the southerners the north 'was like a foreign country' ('3 copie su personaggio di Nadia', Archivio Visconti, C26-004862-63).
- 18 P. Gilliat, 'A conversation with Visconti', *Observer*, 10 September 1961: 'at first I thought of making "Rocco" in colour, but in the end it seemed right that it should be grey: that's the way Milan would strike lonely peasants from the South, seeing snow for the first time, and the cathedral'.
- 19 'Sette volte Annie Girardot piange sul tetto del Duomo', *Corriere della Sera*, 2 April 1960.
- 20 'Alcune pagine del copione', pp. 69-101, Archivio Visconti, C26-004895, p. 89; Archivio Visconti, C26-004877, Scalette.
- 21 'I can't begin to tell you how good it is ... there are shops near the house and everybody knows us' (Archivio Visconti, C26-004892).
- 22 Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, p. 76.
- 23 'Rocco e i suoi fratelli', *Avanti!*, 14 October 1960.
- 24 Milan: Bompiani, 1995, p. 167 [1962].
- 25 Trattamento, Archivio Visconti, C26-004868, p. 12.
- 26 Trattamenti, Archivio Visconti, C26-004876, my translation. (I have occasionally changed the translation either from the subtitles or from the *Visconti. Three Screenplays* translation (by Judith Green, New York: Orion Press, 1970) where I feel it is inaccurate or problematic stylistically (for example, 'terrori!' is translated, strangely, as 'Farmers!' (p. 136).)
- 27 Trattamenti, Archivio Visconti, C26-004876. In the film this was changed to 'even here we have to work like animals'.
- 28 The Left were anxious to play down the 'achievements' of the boom. The production of a terrible drama-documentary called *L'antimiracolo* in 1965 was symptomatic of this attitude to capitalist 'progress'. Many tried to depict the boom as a 'myth' or 'mirage', when in fact it was also a concrete reality (Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema, 1891-1996* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 117). Milan summed up these contradictions, it was the 'capital of the miracle' but also 'a place of perdition for those who were excluded from the miracle' (B. Torri, 'Cinema italiano. 1973', cited in V. Spinazzola in Aa.Vv., *L'opera di Luchino Visconti* (Fiesole: Atti del Convegno di Studi, 27-29 February 1966)).
- 29 After *Rocco*, many Italian film makers produced 'migration films' with varying degrees of success, Scola with *Treviso-Torino. Viaggio nel FIAT-NAM* (1973), Wertmüller with *Mimi metallurgico ferito nell'onore* (1972) and *Tutto a posto niente in ordine* (1973), Gregoretti with *Omicron*. An interesting example of an early 'migration film' which uses the central station is Eduardo De Filippo's *Napoletani a Milano* (1953). Ermanno Olmi's *Ifidanzati* (1963) (about a Milanese worker who moves to Palermo) is seen by Brunetta as a 'reply' to *Rocco* (G. P. Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano 1960-1993* (Rome: Riuniti, 1993)).
- 30 The issue of the nostalgic nature of *Rocco* and of Visconti is discussed in Rohdie, *Rocco and his Brothers*, and in S. Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca. La sfida della cultura di massa (1943-1991)* (Florence: Giunti, 1995), p. 227, and in G. Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973 [1967]), p. 171.
- 31 In fact, the concentration on the world of the lumpenproletariat prompted one critic, Michele Prisco, to argue that the film could equally well have been set in Naples (*Cinema Nuovo* (1961): 133).
- 32 'Il diario di un povero giornalista', cited in *Intermezzo* 15 (20-1) (1960): 13.
- 33 'Interview with Gorgon Gow', Archivio Visconti, C26-005231.
- 34 Visconti called this 'prejudice' 'typically Italian' (*Primi Piani* II (1960)).
- 35 In fact, those same newspapers began to use headlines based on the film for reports on 'southern' criminals, 'Rocco e i suoi pennelli', 'otto mesi e condizionale a un

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- imbianchino meridionale (Vincenzo Rocco)', 31 October–1 November 1960 and 'Carmela e i suoi fratelli', *Corriere Lombardo*, 18–19 October 1960. I have collected numerous other examples of this tendency, from 1960 until the present day.
- 36 'La parola "lavora" mette un po' in sospetto Simone' (Trattamenti, Archivio Visconti, C26-004876).
  - 37 Many critics found that particular scene hard to take; *The Daily Cinema* called it 'close to absurdity' (cutting in Archivio Visconti: Leslie Frewin, Press Cuttings, C26-007925-7956) and Dino Buzzati wrote that 'it is undeniable that in the south there are women like that, but the actress has gone over the top, so as to present a hateful character' ('Luchino fa centro', *Corriere dell'Informazione*, 8 September 1960). Colin Gow, in a radio review, complained about a 'spate of lamenting' (Archivio Visconti, C26-007925-7956).
  - 38 A deputy called Colasanto, who referred explicitly to the 'cut' scenes in the play (they had not yet been wholly cut), cited in Baldelli, *I film di Luchino Visconti*, p. 197. The Communist deputy Napolitano replied that 'it is an insult for you lot who can't help those same rural labourers escape from their terrible conditions' ('Vivace dibattito alla Camera sulla censura cinematografica e teatrale', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 November 1960).
  - 39 For Rino Dal Sasso, 'Visconti non conosce bene il mondo meridionale' ('Il naturalismo di Visconti', *Filmcritica* 102 (October 1960): 675). Visconti himself had earlier said that he knew Lucania 'well' and 'loved it very much' (G. F. Cascioli, 'Visconti dalle origini a Rocco', *Primi Piani* 3–4 (1960)).
  - 40 P. P. Pasolini, *Vie Nuove* 39(XV) (1 October 1960), now in *Le belle bandiere* (Rome: Riuniti, 1977), p. 49.
  - 41 Michele Prisco replying to the long and interesting debate about *Rocco* in *Cinema Nuovo* (1961) p. 132. Often these criticisms were linked to those commonly made, from the Left, of Testori – his concentration on the sordid world of the lumpenproletariat, his highlighting of sex, crime and violence.
  - 42 *ibid.*
  - 43 Sasso, 'Il naturalismo di Visconti', pp. 675–80.
  - 44 Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti*, p. 171.
  - 45 Luchino Visconti, 'The miracle that gave man crumbs', *Films and Filming* (January 1961): 11.
  - 46 It may be this form of 'research' which is at the basis of the stereotypes I have discussed. The press at the time of mass internal migration frequently associated criminal acts with southern migrants and made reference to the regional origins of those involved in common crimes and in particular with so-called 'crimes of passion'. Since G. Fofi's pioneering work on Turin (*L'immigrazione meridionale a Torino* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1960)), no serious research has been carried out in this area.
  - 47 'Quaderni del Cucmi', 21, *Luchino Visconti*, a cura di Lorenzo Pellizari (ed.), p. 19. Although he added that 'I want to insist that it is representative of the whole condition' (cited in Peter Harcourt, 'Visconti and his obsessions', *New University* (February 1962): 25).
  - 48 'Rocco – Trattamento incompleto', Archivio Visconti, C26-004866.
  - 49 'Critici e magistrati anatomizzano il film *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*', *Corriere della Sera*, 16 October 1960.
  - 50 Archivio Visconti. The cases cited were those of Fenaroli, Maganella and Rosemarie but Visconti added that he could have referred to 'ten thousand others' ('Trascrizione di registrazione in preparazione dal soggetto', 2 copie, Archivio Visconti, C26-004851). Later, Visconti appeared to contradict his earlier claims about the everyday typicality of *Rocco*; in a 1965 interview he was quoted as saying that 'the violence and the cruelty were completely determinant of the story, of exceptional circumstances'

- (Intervista con Lietta Tornabuoni, *Sipario* (1965), cited in Amministrazione Provinciale di Ferrara, *Luchino Visconti* (Milan: Prema, 1995)).
- 51 'Quaderni del Cucmi', 21, *Luchino Visconti*, a cura di Lorenzo Pellizari (interview), p. 19. Dates were given in the original script.
  - 52 *L'Ariada*, 1960–1961, Script, Archivio Visconti, TP43-0026-2674.
  - 53 There had been five murders at the Idroscalo, the artificial lake near Milan where Visconti set the murder scene, since 1945. For the Del Bono case, and the confession of a well-to-do Milanese see the *Corriere della Sera*, 14–21 March 1959. Interestingly, Judge Spagnuolo, who was later to censor *Rocco*, was involved in the investigations. Salvatori's version of events ('the same morning in which we left Milan a prostitute was found murdered – stabbed 38 times – in more or less the same place where Luchino wanted to film') is unreliable, as reported in Faldini and Fofi, *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, p. 31.
  - 54 Baldelli, *I film di Visconti*, p. 197.
  - 55 Much has been written on the many-layered literary origins and inspiration for *Rocco*. The obvious references are Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Verga's *I Malavoglia*, Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*, Gramsci's *Notes on the Southern Question*, Testori's *Il Ponte della Ghisolfi*, Rocco Scotellaro's *L'uva puttanella* (Bari, 1955) and *I contadini del sud*, Arthur Miller's *A View from a Bridge*, the Bible. We could also add John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* and some elements of Grand Opera and Greek theatre.
  - 56 For the theory of stereotypes and their use in Italy see John Dickie, 'Murder by stereotype: Contessa Lara's "Un omicida" and the two faces of the imaginary South', *The Italianist* 15 (1995): 103–15; idem, 'The south as other: from Liberal Italy to the Lega Nord', in A. Cento Bull and A. Giorgio (eds) *Culture and Society in Southern Italy, Past and Present*, supplement to *The Italianist* 14 (1994): 124–40; idem, *Darkest Italy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999 [forthcoming]).
  - 57 Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 117.
  - 58 Communication to Visconti, Archivio Visconti, C26-004882.
  - 59 'What destroys the family is ... its extraordinary internal loyalties and the contradiction between those and the society in which it finds itself' (Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti*, p. 174).
  - 60 E. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1958). For the extended discussion (and bibliography) around the issue of 'amoral familism' see D. De Masi (ed.) *Le basi morali di una società arretrata* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1976). For Banfield, the extreme poverty and backwardness of the villagers was 'largely (but not entirely)' due to the 'inability of the villagers to act together for the common good, or indeed for any good transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family' (p. 10).
  - 61 Rosaria 'He is your brother!', Ciro 'I know, unfortunately' (Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 188).
  - 62 Paul Ginsborg has recently revisited this controversial concept, dropping the 'amoral' aspects. For Ginsborg, familism exists when certain 'forms of family privatism triumph' and the family members 'exclusively pursue the interests of the family, ignoring the needs of groups outside of the restricted family circle and refusing to build a relationship with the State based upon reciprocal obligations' ('Familism' in idem (ed.) *Stato dell'Italia* (Milan: Il Saggiatore Bruno Mondadori, 1994), p. 79). See also idem, 'La famiglia italiana oltre il privato per superare l'isolamento', *ibid.*, pp. 284–90.
  - 63 Rocco to Simone, final script (*Three Screenplays*, p. 130).
  - 64 Aristarco and Carancini, 'La sceneggiatura', *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, p. 183.
  - 65 'Ciro ... is selfish' (Rosaria, Trattamento, Archivio Visconti, C26-004890).
  - 66 'Enemy of your mother!' In the original (final) script, this fate also befalls Vincenzo:

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- 'if Vincenzo wants to do that, it means he has no more mother' (Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, pp. 189, 115). Ciro is also accused, earlier on, by Rosaria: 'he doesn't love his family any more' (*Three Screenplays*, p. 159).
- 67 Tonetti, *Luchino Visconti*, p. 83.
- 68 Nowell-Smith, writing in 1967, talked about 'a conception of the family which has no relevance whatever to life in industrial society' (*Luchino Visconti*), p. 174.
- 69 See my 'The family and the "economic miracle": social transformation, work, leisure and development at Bovisa and Comasina (Milan), 1950–1970', *Contemporary European History* 4(3) (November 1995): 315–38.
- 70 Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 156.
- 71 *ibid.*, p. 173.
- 72 See the interview with Visconti in S. Benelli, *Incontri impossibili* (Milano: Lerici, 1960) where he claimed that 'when the family no longer exists all is lost', p. 283. See also Robert Benayoun, 'Pour un bilan positif du sujet', *Positif* 40 (July 1961): 4–16; Ugo Finetti, 'Il tema della famiglia nell'opera di Visconti', *Cinema Nuovo* 202 (1969): 434–41; and Guido Aristarco, 'La dissoluzione della società attraverso la dissoluzione della famiglia', *Cinema Nuovo* 45 (2, n.360) (May–August 1996): 21–7.
- 73 'Quaderni del Cucmi', 21, *Luchino Visconti*, a cura di Lorenzo Pellizari (interview), p. 19.
- 74 Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 81; *Three Screenplays*, p. 117.
- 75 A few citations from the play are enough to give a flavour of this: 'It is not enough for those negresses to take away our homes, jobs, offices and flats, no, now they want the men as well!', 'they steal everything! Peace, money, women, men, work!' (Giovanni Testori, *L'Arielda* (Milan: Feltrinelli (1960), p. 131).
- 76 The original is in Milanese dialect: 'Bongiorno, shura Maria; 'Mamma mia, ha vist che rob?' 'Africa'; 'Ma, di dove veranno?'; 'Lucania'; 'Lucania, ma dove questa Lucania?' 'Giù, giù, in fondo, in fondo'; 'ho capito, proprio terra di primavera'. The version in the published script is different:
- PORTIERA [*watches family come into house*]. Africa.  
VICINA [*neighbour*]. Where are they from?  
PORTIERA: Lucania ... you know as well as I do that they don't even take them into consideration for these apartments if they're not from the south.  
(Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 76; *Three Screenplays*, p. 110)
- 77 Trattamenti, Archivio Visconti, C26-004876.
- 78 Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 87 (my translation).
- 79 The speech was made by a bar owner after the theft of the jewels (this scene was later changed into the dry-cleaning scene). It is worth quoting in full:
- siete tutti d'accordo, brutta razza di terroni morti di fame. Il foglio di via a tutti dovrebbe darvi la polizia di Milano a disinfettare la città da certi parassiti come loro. Tornino al loro 'paesello' a morir di fame che già se non ci fossero loro milanesi a sfamarli quei buoni a niente a pancia vuota starebbero. E per di più fanno i fieri, gli offesi ... mettono su arie. Morti di fame e magnaccia. Ecco cosa sono e vengono a infestare Milano con i loro pidocchi.
- (Archivio Visconti, C26-004868)
- A later racist speech by Ivo, Simone's friend, was also cut from the final version ('*Rocco – Trattamento incompleto*', Archivio Visconti, C26-004866). In yet another version, the police investigating Nadia's murder ask Simone if he is Italian (Sceneggiatura, Archivio Visconti, C26-004901, p. 70). Finally, in another version a 'northern builder' threatens that he and his colleagues will 'stop the city, to put an end to the disgrace of these *terroni* who come and take the bread out of our mouths'

- (Sceneggiatura, Archivio Visconti, C26-004901, p. 69). Unfortunately, many of these 'treatments' and scripts are not dated, so an exact reconstruction of the preparation for the film is not possible.
- 80 By southerners (Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, pp. 77, 83, 95).
- 81 There are also some detailed little touches: the oranges they are carrying, the decor of the interiors and so on. In the Archivio Visconti, the characteristics of the Lucanians are identified as 'their habits, their food, their tendency to limit friends and acquaintances to their fellow southerners' (Trattamento, Archivio Visconti, C26-004868).
- 82 Monica Stirling, *A Screen of Time. A Study of Luchino Visconti* (New York: Harcourt, 1979), p. 144. In his diary of the film G. Carancini wrote that 'Italy and Lucania are very similar to Greece' (p. 222).
- 83 G. Carancini, 'Dall'"idea" alla sceneggiatura "definitiva"', in Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 62. Rosaria was described as having a 'volcanic southernness' by Carancini in the book of the script (p. 220).
- 84 2 Trattamento: LV/Suso/VP, Archivio Visconti, C26-004873, p. 14; Sceneggiatura, Archivio Visconti, C26-004901, p. 4.
- 85 Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 95; *Three Screenplays*, p. 136.
- 86 Sceneggiatura, Archivio Visconti, C26-004901, p. 34.
- 87 Aristarco and Carancini, *Rocco*, p. 184 (my translation). Vincenzo adds that *Ciro* has 'turned more Milanese even than *Ginetta*' (*Three Screenplays*, p. 260).
- 88 G. Carancini, 'Dall'"idea" alla sceneggiatura "definitiva"', pp. 57-63.
- 89 *Storia del cinema*, p. 89. See also the comments of Claretta Tonetti: 'every word counts because the characters are not very articulate. Every verbalization of feelings is a great effort, and because of this, sentences are short, linguistically primitive, and significant' (*Luchino Visconti*, p. 83).
- 90 'It is like in the Chinese quarter', 'Trascrizione di registrazione in preparazione dal soggetto', 2 copie, Archivio Visconti, C26-004851, p. 5. A later extract from another version of the treatment described this environment in more detail:
- there at Lambrate there are many southerners . . . in the same building . . . it is with these families that the first social relationships are built up . . . the young boys *Ciro* and *Luca* meet and play with the young 'terrori' in the courtyards which have been given the letters A, B, C . . . despite the fact that these other children have always lived in Milan and that *Ciro* and *Luca* come from far away . . . it is nearly primordial the way that their memory of the blood relationships is revealed and that friendship can be born and grow between them.
- (Trattamento, Archivio Visconti, C26-004868)
- The fans at the boxing match are referred to as a 'southern colony'. The Parondi family makes 'few friends outside the environment of the southern immigrants' (Trattamento, Archivio Visconti, C26-004873, pp. 12, 13).
- 91 Brunetta, *Storia del cinema*, p. 88.