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Interrogating the Esso Insignia: Feminised Labour Depictions and the Economic Boom

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyses the correlation between the infiltration of global capitalism and the representation of feminised labour in the Italian cinema of the economic boom. Specifically, it focuses on the presence of Esso oil company branding, frequently featured in Italian films from the 1950s and 1960s that centre depictions of feminised labour, including but not limited to the sale of sex. The juxtaposition between Esso branding and the visual representations of working women's stories on screen emphasises the discrepancy between the thriving financial success of global industry and the struggles of working-class Italian women, for whom the promises of the economic boom proved elusive. Yet the juxtaposition also demonstrates the substantial economic role played by women, upon whom Italian society is dependent as a form of both fiscal and cultural capital.

SOMMARIO

Questo saggio esamina la correlazione tra l'infiltrazione del capitalismo globale e la rappresentazione del lavoro femminilizzato nel cinema italiano del boom economico. In particolare, questo scritto si concentra sulla presenza del marchio della compagnia petrolifera Esso, spesso presente nei film italiani degli anni '50 e '60 che si focalizzano su rappresentazioni del lavoro femminilizzato che comprendono, anche se non in modo esclusivo, la vendita di sesso. La giustapposizione tra il marchio Esso e le rappresentazioni visive delle storie di donne lavoratrici sullo schermo sottolinea la discrepanza tra il fiorente successo finanziario dell'industria globale e le lotte delle donne italiane della classe operaia, per le quali le promesse del boom economico si sono rivelate inconsistenti. Tuttavia, questa giustapposizione dimostra anche il ruolo economico sostanziale svolto dalle donne, dalle quali la società italiana dipende come forma di capitale sia fiscale che culturale.

KEYWORDS

Esso; prostitution; gender; capitalism; Italian cinema; economic boom

PAROLE CHIAVE

Esso; prostituzione; genere; capitalismo; cinema italiano; boom economico

Introduction

Trailed by a wanted murderer as he leaves the apartment of a prostitute, Astarita (Raymond Pellegrin), one of the villains of Luigi Zampa's 1954 film *La romana*, passes an Esso petrol stand. The street is slick with rain, and in the evening darkness the only light sources are the streetlights and the brightly lit fuel stop, its doors open to

potential customers. But Astarita does not enter. Instead, he walks briskly past, and for one moment his profile is parallel to the petrol stand (Figure 1). The camera is fixed at low height, at a straight angle, so that as the fascist commander exits from the bottom-right corner of the frame, revealing two other fascist officers in the background, his coattails almost skirt over the camera lens. The camera is motionless at this point, rendering the spectator privy to an omnipotent, unnoticed gaze, much like that of the unseen nemesis who is stalking the fascist commander. From this line of sight,¹ the viewer's perspective is physically subordinate to Astarita's – a correlation that is quickly reversed in the following scenes.

Astarita is the man who sexually assaults Gina Lollobrigida's Adriana Silenzi, the film's protagonist, triggering the change in her trajectory from would-be wife to prostitute. The trauma that results from the attack, coupled with the revelation that her fiancé Gino is already a married man, has an unfavourable impact on Adriana and her aspirations for the future. With a little coercion from Xenia Valderi's Gisella, the same friend who helped Astarita to orchestrate the sexual assault, Adriana agrees to become a prostitute. As is typical of many dynamics featuring a victim and an abuser, Astarita exploits Adriana's shame to his advantage, so that he maintains a presence in her life. This exploitation, the film demonstrates, is not only sexual but also economic and political. After he rapes Adriana, Astarita guiltily slips her some cash, a gesture that portrays his belief that monetary reparations could make up for his forcing himself upon her. He later offers her further economic stability in the form of a home and all the material objects she could ever desire, and, wherever possible, he intervenes in her life through the manipulation of his political influence.

Yet Astarita remains unsatisfied, because his adherence to the patriarchal conception of woman as commodity makes him unable to understand that while physical relations



Figure 1. Astarita passes an Esso booth moments before his murder (*La romana*, 1954), Luigi Zampa. Retrieved 6 July 2020 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

might be purchased, the authentic affection he desires is not for sale. Adriana's resistance thus undercuts the message conveyed by the culture of mass industrial expansion within which the fascist commander functions, which suggests that anything can be acquired with sufficient capital. I argue that the Esso logo's proximity to Astarita on screen, where it functions in contrast to Adriana's emotional distance, is a significant ideological prompt that forces the film's viewers to confront the system of relations binding the symbolic value the petrol station represents and the ideological valence of the character who encounters it daily.²

My assertion is that *La romana* depicts an Italian capitalist system that is fundamentally patriarchal, depending upon women as a form of economic and cultural capital.³ When the film was released in 1954, nearly ten years had passed since Mussolini's dead body had been hung from an Esso station in Piazzale Loreto on 28 April 1945, but elements of the Duce's legacy remained in place. As was the case under fascism, post-war patriarchal capitalism in the 1950s continued to situate women in a subordinate position to men, fuelled by gender-normative assertions that erase the boundary between the married woman and the woman who sells sex.⁴ This erasure emerges with clarity, in the post-fascist period, through the cinematic representation of female-identifying prostitutes.⁵

In this essay, I examine Zampa's *La romana* alongside several other films from the same period to elucidate a cinematic critique of capitalism that centres on women. Building upon the scholarship that has noted the significance of prostitution in post-war Italian cinema, I juxtapose the prostitute's on-screen representation with that of other female societal roles as a means of interrogating the value of women as portrayed within the cultural representations of the economic boom.⁶ In doing so, I offer a nuanced perspective of what Tambour has called 'seduction's working class',⁷ connecting the visual and spatial depiction of prostitution with a hierarchical organisation of mobility that situates disenfranchised and impoverished women at its lowermost stratum.⁸

Situating my corpus of films in their historical context, when legalised prostitution was under increased social and political scrutiny, my analysis interrogates the unconscious relationship that the protagonists of these films have with the Esso branding that recurs with surprising frequency.⁹ I argue that this relationship mirrors the gendered relations between subject and system under capitalism. In films such as *L'Amore in città* (Carlo Lizzani and others, 1953), *Le notti di Cabiria* (Fellini, 1957), and *La romana*, the Esso logo appears prominently in proximity to female protagonists, signalling at once the women's closeness to and alienation from the benefits that Esso oil provides. The Esso logo also serves to define Italian masculinity, as I argue in the essay's penultimate section, with reference to *Le notti bianche* (Luchino Visconti, 1957) and *Accattone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1961) – an early exhibition of the themes that would later be treated in Pasolini's unfinished novel *Petrolio* (1992). I conclude by returning to *La romana*, whose depiction of the Esso insignia makes possible a comprehensive summation of its symbolism in contemporary Italy.

Exhibitions of Esso in *L'Amore in città* (1953)

Recent scholarship on prostitution in Italian cinema has emphasised how the portrayal of female sex workers in the post-war period is freighted with symbolism, made to embody

the Italian nation and to reflect its moral preoccupations.¹⁰ Often, the prostitute is a minor character, a background actor who lends 'a certain underworld ambience' to the film's mise-en-scène, or, alternatively, she plays a secondary role where she is romantically and/or sexually linked to a male lead, advancing his character arc but not her own.¹¹ When, as happens rarely in the Italian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, the prostitute is a protagonist, the films tend overtly or covertly to castigate the values of capitalism that flourished during this era.¹² In *La romana*, and in the numerous other films from the same period that I discuss in this essay, the ubiquitous use of the Esso imagery intersects with the cinematic depictions of women, as prostitutes and otherwise, to symbolically undermine the promises of the capitalist order. The Esso logo is a symbol of American capitalism that functions as a metonymic substitute for the capitalist and patriarchal monster that derives its power from the exploitation of others. It represents a system of immense wealth that is entirely at odds with the impoverished existences these women live. Even though the Esso insignia is a commonplace feature of their quotidian landscapes, these characters remain alienated from it; much like the air they breathe, or the economics they live under, the Esso symbol exists for them in the form of the physical products and functions that oil facilitates, but it has no conscious, meaningful bearing on their existence. Depicting this lack of a direct relationship between these female characters and this bastion of capitalism on screen is a critical and didactic tool for the exhibition of capitalism's inherent violence, and for how we, as viewers, who are interpellated by the same system, can look to the prostitute as a locus of resistance.

As Laura Mulvey argues, on-screen depictions of women operate on a dual basis, as an erotic object both for the characters within the plot and for the spectator in the auditorium.¹³ The cinema is the expository site that associates women with capitalism, in which the product (sexual pleasure derived from looking) is estranged not only from its producer (the female-coded body) but also from the consumer. At the cinema, the male spectator participates in a perverse system of exchange that Linda Williams locates at the inception of capitalism's development: instead of purchasing sex, a tangible product, the consumer invests in the titillation of an aesthetic illusion, whereby 'persons begin relating to each other as things, and things take on the social relations of persons'.¹⁴ But the act of prostitution subverts this alienating process, as Claire Thora Solomon argues, 'manufacturing something out of nothing and converting people into something useful, surpassing the categories of labour-power and work themselves'.¹⁵ The product is reclaimed by its producer, who creates a monetary solution to the systems of gendered and classed inequality that disproportionately affect women's access to income and employment under capitalism.

These processes can be ascertained in the short film '*Tentato suicidio*', directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, one portion of the six-part collaborative film *L'Amore in città* (1953). The film, framed as an investigative project on urban life in post-war Italy, focuses almost entirely on female narratives.¹⁶ The principal subjects of Antonioni's interviews are five young women, connected by their attempts at suicide. Maria, a shunned mistress and factory worker, is among them. Heartbroken and rendered financially vulnerable by an unwanted pregnancy, Maria formulates a plan to take her own life. The audience is party to a re-enactment of a scene in which Maria walks calmly to a fountain, located directly opposite an Esso petrol pump, and swallows her

poison pills (Figure 2).¹⁷ She survives the suicide attempt, and lives to recount her unhappy tale to the director.

This short sequence is provocative for multiple reasons. In foregrounding Maria's tale of sorrow, Antonioni gives priority to the significance of the individual over the larger societal structures within which the interviewee functions. The viewers are invited inside the private world of the struggling human being and see themselves reflected, not specifically in her suicidal tendencies, but in her failure to find meaning in existence now that her romantic hopes have been dashed. The Esso pump, physically and ideologically juxtaposed with this Italian tragedy, appears rigidly fixed in front of Maria.

Esso, as the film's viewers could be expected to know, is a branch of Standard Oil, a company established in 1870 by the American tycoon John D. Rockefeller, the richest man in modern history. By the late 1880s, Standard Oil controlled 90% of American refineries, and up until 1962 it operated under various titles, in nearly fifty countries worldwide, including Esso in Italy.¹⁸ Seeking to gain a foothold in the Italian marketplace, Esso employed what Elisabetta Bini describes as 'an international male workforce', which distributed 'the benefits of mass consumption across the world'.¹⁹ Esso's self-conception as a distinctly male brand is suggested etymologically, since in Italian 'Esso' is the antiquated form of the pronoun 'he'. I argue, therefore, that when the female characters discussed in this essay repeatedly encounter the Esso branding in the Italian landscapes of the economic boom, it serves as a reminder not only of global capitalism, whose dominion extends to every corner of the earth, but also of a



Figure 2. Maria prepares to take poison pills on a public bench, opposite an Esso pump ('Tentato suicidio' in *L'Amore in città*, 1953), Michelangelo Antonioni. Retrieved 6 July 2020 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

specifically patriarchal capitalism, in which that dominion is coded as male. In the symbolic lexicon of patriarchal capitalist globalisation, oil industry branding is particularly significant, connoting progress, economic prosperity, and technological advancement. Conversely, none of these positive connotations extend into the lives of the women who live on the peripheries of Italian cities. Even though the Esso logo's dominion includes these neighbourhoods, their inhabitants – and in particular their female inhabitants – are entirely estranged from the benefits of this international corporation but are nevertheless subjected to its advertising and confronted by its ubiquitous logo.

Consider, for a moment, the vast differences between *Tentato suicidio's* Maria, a single, working-class woman, and the faceless, oil-rich tycoon, represented on-screen not by a human but by a trademark. Maria's daily walks take her by the Esso station, even as she has no use for the petrol pump, and in the process estrange the character from her environment. Maria does not own a car; she takes the bus to work, as does her former lover Giacomo, whose loss is visually reinforced by the Esso logo's appearance, suggesting the symbolic absence of 'him', the man who spurns her. For the status and progress of the transnational corporation like Standard Oil, the loss of one man is insignificant, but for Maria, losing Giacomo proves ruinous, because her virtue, and thus her value, has been tarnished in the eyes of society. Whilst Maria, in her re-enactment, ingests her poison pills, numerous cars and a public tram flash by in the background. But the Esso pump forms a physical barrier between Maria and those vehicles, dividing up the space between pedestrians and vehicle owners.

In her innovative research on multi-media platforms and Italy's economic miracle, Natalie Fullwood identifies vehicles, specifically cars, as an iconic component of this era's *mise-en-scène*. She asserts that, although consumer goods became newly affordable to Italians in this period, the images of the aspirational lifestyle that these commodities exemplified were more accessible than were the objects themselves.²⁰ This insight is particularly significant if we are to understand the car in terms of the mobility it offers. I refer here not only to the vehicle's ability to transport its passengers from one destination to the next, but also to its function as a signifier of social mobility: the promise of an exemplary lifestyle attainable via capitalism, packaged in the form of the nuclear family that Maria fears she can no longer obtain. Middle-class men drive cars; wealthy men own cars that are driven by working-class men. Women, at least within the parameters of *L'Amore in città*, never drive cars, although some are pictured perched delicately upon the frame of a Vespa. Working-class women take the bus. But on screen the women who sell sex are always pictured walking on foot, forced to '*battere il marciapiede*' – literally, to pound the pavement – one of the *many* Italian terms for prostitution. Thus, the use of Esso imagery in *Tentato suicidio* alludes to a hierarchy of mobility, one that works in terms of both gender and class, with society's poorest and most disenfranchised women at the bottom. A lack of access to a private vehicle implies that the woman can be the product or the means of production, but never the producer. Ownership is reserved for the affluent classes. The prostitute walks past the petrol station; the car stops there. The prostitute, like the petrol station, serves the car's owner. The car itself functions as a site of exchange, replacing the brothel as the place where the client pays for the commodity that is the female body.

The very real consequences that may befall a woman like Maria occur not only in Antonioni's *Tentato suicidio* but also in the episode that immediately precedes it in

the omnibus film: Carlo Lizzani's *'L'Amore che si paga'*. Lizzani applies the same direct-to-camera strategy as Antonioni to interview the prostitutes that he meets on Rome's streets. These nocturnal beings walk amid sparsely populated streets, *'per nascondere la propria decadenza fisica'*.²¹ As Danielle Hipkins has noted, the commodification of younger, more attractive women otherises their older colleagues; ageing is considered unattractive, thus rendering the product that veteran prostitutes sell less valuable. In Hipkins's words, the 'marginal identity [of the aged prostitute] carries and troubles spatial, regional, and racial differences through her mobility and promiscuous bodily contact'.²² It is logical then, that the prostitute's presence in Lizzani's segment of the film contributes to the viewer's sense of foreboding upon seeing the opening scenes of *'L'Amore che si paga'*. The combination of shuttered storefronts and suspicious looks that the camera provokes from the women at work, coupled with an ominous non-diegetic soundtrack, makes the film look more akin to a horror movie than a documentary. Together these elements create the impression of an underworld that comes to life when the city descends into darkness. But the people who creep around the streets of Rome are not brutes; they are women. In the same manner that Baudelaire's *flâneur* became the emblem of urban modernity in nineteenth-century Europe, the wandering woman in the post-war Italian city signifies modernity's failures, the radical disparities in industrial development, the urban poverty that is the consequence of global capitalism.

Although they are criminalised under Italian law because of their profession, prostitutes are, it can be argued, in fact condemned for unmasking their society's many flaws. Unmarried mothers, women without husbands, the children of deceased or unemployed parents, deserted lovers – the rejects of aspirational, middle-class Italian society and its values – are among those who turn to prostitution. I do not mean to suggest that these women became prostitutes to signify their rejection of the ideological order of their community. More frequently, at least in their cinematic depictions, they are the victims of exploitation by a would-be paramour, whose deceit or inability to commit to a family forces the victim into a peripheral position. Nevertheless, the prostitute, particularly as she appears on screen, constitutes a means of challenging a status quo that disproportionately disadvantages underprivileged women. The realist style that Antonioni and Lizzani implement challenges the viewer's perspective on their own place in this system of inequality. In his essay *'Alcune idee sul cinema'*, Cesare Zavattini, who wrote the screenplay for both Lizzani and Antonioni's chapters in *L'Amore in città*, asserts that the most pressing question of this time is the absence of *'l'attenzione sociale'*, that results from the failure to intimately know and understand societal reality.²³

By engaging in the world of women's reality, Zavattini and the filmmakers who collaborate with him on *L'Amore in città* not only criticise bourgeois, conservative ideas about women's sexuality, but also are advocates for the women they survey and defend their responses to the conditions of impoverishment. Lizzani, for example, clearly attempts to encourage viewers to empathise with his interview subjects by including in his episode close-up shots of these women's faces as they discuss the tragic details of their stories. He follows these women through the spaces they inhabit, creating a collage of the sites and locations that lead back to their oftentimes small and unsafe homes. Throughout *'L'Amore che si paga'* there is a notable absence of men

in front of the camera lens. Where men are visible, they do not interact with the members of the interviewing team. Consequently, Lizzani establishes a divide between the beneficiaries of paternalist, capitalistic Italian society and the exploited women who exist amongst the bottommost tiers of this system.

Commitment to the 'social attention' that the documentary style facilitates continues into Zavattini's chapter of *L'Amore in città*, entitled '*Storia di Caterina*'. Once again, the Esso branding makes an appearance. This time it immediately follows a night-time scene where the episode's protagonist lies in the darkness of a public park, physically shaken after having abandoned her infant son. Her sobs pierce the silence of the evening, so that when the camera cuts to an image of a busy street in Rome the next day, the sounds of heavy traffic provide quite a startling contrast. The city moves onwards despite Caterina's despair, and a heavily packed lorry flashes past the camera.

Caterina, who travels on foot, is cast off as a reject from the thriving modernity and progress that the evolution of consumer culture exemplifies. Her mobility is slow and tedious; the rest of the city, as embodied by the fast-moving vehicle that transports goods, travels onwards without her. As the signifier of wealth, the Esso pump visible on the right side of the road provides a stark contrast to Caterina's extreme poverty (Figure 3). Caterina Rigoglioso is a poor, Sicilian woman who returns to Rome illegally, after she is rejected by her family, who disapprove of her for having a child out of wedlock. She has no resources and is frightened that the police may send her back to Palermo. Her southern identity and distinctly Sicilian surname complicate her situation,



Figure 3. A truck hurtles down a street in central Rome, passing an Esso gas station. '*Storia di Caterina*' in *L'Amore in città* (1953), Cesare Zavattini. Retrieved 7 July 2020 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

so that xenophobia and classist discrimination are among the hurdles with which she must struggle. More troublingly, she is not the only mother in Rome struggling to feed her child. This is evidenced by her visit to the Province of Rome's *Ufficio Assistenziale Illegittimi* (the Illegitimate Children's Support Association), where she encounters a spiralling line of exhausted mothers either seeking support or attempting to entrust the care of their children to the state. Watching Caterina walk past the Esso pump as she wanders the streets of Rome in search of a solution, the spectator is forced to engage with the inequalities that the Italian capital fosters. Why, in this European metropolis bursting with new economic opportunities and suffused with the signs of foreign investment, does such poverty persist? The response, suggested by the ever-present Esso logo, is that women like Caterina are excluded from the systems that foster the accumulation of wealth and promise the 'benefits of mass consumption', but which in fact serve a transnational male elite that exploits vulnerable women.²⁴ Although Caterina is eventually reunited with her son and publicly acquitted of any crime, the viewer is left to doubt whether she can ever find financial stability.

The depiction of Rome as a city with a deep wealth divide is accentuated by the concluding chapter of *L'Amore in città*. Alberto Lattuada's *'Gli italiani si voltano'* is a short, scopophilic saga that features numerous attractive and well-dressed young women going about their business in Rome's city centre. Each step, every action, each foray into the public arena, is policed by the harassing stares of the men who watch them. Thematically, the episode corresponds with *'L'Amore che si paga'*, the first instalment in the film's cinematic-journalistic undertaking. In each short episode, the women on screen are shown to be judged in terms of their sexual propensities. Those who turn tricks in the dead of night are labelled delinquents, serving as a cautionary example for those who might transgress their society's parameters. And yet, they still choose to sell sex, albeit often because of unfavourable circumstances. By contrast, the well-dressed women of daytime Rome do not choose to be stalked by the strange men who ogle them, searching for their next erotic encounter.²⁵ Where the element of consent is lacking, the women appear to be more desirable to the male gazes that scrutinise their bodies, and the women's lack of awareness – or perhaps their fine-tuned ability to ignore this unwanted attention – makes them a more viable commodity. This is illustrated in the example of a young woman in a high-necked jumper, whose ample bosom moves in time with the rhythm of the farcical soundtrack. As she walks, various passers-by stare in her direction, clearly attracted by her figure. Behind the wheel of a car, one anonymous, bespectacled voyeur crawls along the curb beside her, moving at the woman's pace, almost salivating as a starving man would do in the presence of a banquet, his gaze moving up and down her body. The presence of the car – again a barrier, this time between the consumer and the goods – emboldens the lecherous man. He calls out to the woman, but the sound is muffled by the director's choice of intrusive, non-diegetic music. The woman never responds; she never meets his gaze and gives no sign of interest in the man. Instead, she appears to smirk when his lack of attention to the road causes him to collide with another car.

Lattuada's chapter also confirms class status through the attractive clothing the women are wearing and the buildings from which they step out. The fact that they live in the city centre and not on the outskirts of town is a nod to their belonging to the nucleus of Rome's more affluent classes. For the most part, the narrative maintains the

upbeat tone that signifies the presence of societally acceptable women. The whimsical music, accompanied by the brightness of a sunny day that lights up the women's faces, suggests that all this leering is harmless, even natural. The reverie breaks, however, in the final scene, where a young lady travels alone on a bus, whilst an older, well-dressed, white-collar man follows her all the way to the outskirts of the city. The scene is deeply uncomfortable. First, the man watches the woman as a departing passenger gives up his seat to her. At this point he makes direct eye contact with the woman, though they never exchange a single word. The camera closes in on the man's face, imitating the girl's lower position by angling its lens upwards. His spectacles magnify his wide and lifeless black pupils. His lips are pursed resolutely, neither frowning nor smiling. The girl responds by anxiously lowering her gaze. When the bus empties of all its other passengers, a close-up shot focuses on the bottom of the girl's skirt as she nervously pulls it down to cover her knees; the viewer shares the young woman's sense of fear and disempowerment. All she can do is try to hide more of herself from the stranger's invasive gaze. What might have formerly been conceived as the depiction of a farcical, harmless gag is transformed into the tangible threat of rape. Undeniably, even the women at the heart of the city are in danger when in public, but the closer a woman is to the periphery, the more vulnerable she becomes. Her worth, and therefore her safety, are measured in terms not only of her physical attributes but also of her physical proximity to the centre, an incontrovertible sign of her class status. For the entitled men, a woman's lack of wealth equates to her lesser worth, which signifies in turn her greater vulnerability. The bus from centre to periphery thus becomes a site of potential threat to the women who are not safely tucked into the private cars served by Esso stations, and the assault of a woman on society's fringes is understood as no great crime, because she has failed to attain the standard of living that the Esso insignia connotes. *L'Amore in città* thus utilises the oil company's logo as a key ideological prompt, to construct a critique of a system that locates women's safety, sexuality, and societal value at the very bottom of its hierarchy. The only socially sanctioned means for poor women to fulfil patriarchal capitalism's demands is to marry a man who is already wealthy or who has the means to become so, thus fulfilling the demands of Luce Irigaray's theory regarding women on the market. To secure space and safety in a society that perceives them as objects, argues Irigaray, women must become a commodity exchanged between men; they will either be sold or stolen.²⁶

Women on the Market: Le notti di Cabiria (1957)

The eponymous protagonist of Federico Fellini's 1957 film *Le notti di Cabiria* is described in the film and recognised by her neighbours as the woman who lives 'da Via Cecilia, dopo il rifornimento di benzina. È una che fa la vita'.²⁷ Proximity to a petrol station, then, is part of Cabiria's identity, at least as it is defined by a small boy riding a bicycle who passes by her after she is saved from drowning in the Tiber, and who utters the phrase quoted above. Moments after he does so, Cabiria (Giulietta Masina) rounds a corner, and there stands an Esso silo in front of her home (Figure 4). As a prostitute by trade, Cabiria owns a small home in the Roman *borgate*, a space characterised by what John David Rhodes calls 'abject, crudely made, single-storey houses'.²⁸ The *borgate* are both physically and



Figure 4. A scene of the Esso silo that greets Cabiria as she rounds the corner into her neighbourhood. *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957), Federico Fellini. Retrieved 7 July 2020 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

ideologically on the periphery of Rome's city centre, positioned directly behind, and therefore always in proximity to, the petroculture represented by the Esso brand, whose allure of economic stability and status remains elusive for the *borgate's* residents.²⁹ Throughout the film, Cabiria's many misadventures allow for the exploration of what Hipkins terms the 'spatial dichotomies of boomtime Rome in the context of female prostitution'.³⁰ Cabiria frequently enters metropolitan Roman spaces to sell her wares, driven, in large part, by her romantic aspirations, an indication of her pursuit of social mobility. But these attempts mainly result in failure and further disillusionment. After she is betrayed by Giorgio (Franco Fabrizi), who pushes her into the Tiber, risking her life to steal a measly 40,000 lira (worth around 25 US dollars today), Cabiria proceeds with her single life and declares to her friends that she has no further interest in pursuing a romantic relationship. The declaration proves short lived. After she ventures onto the Via Veneto, one of the most famous and expensive locations in Rome, she stumbles into a personal encounter with Alberto Lazzari (Amedeo Nazzari), a wealthy man of some fame. His oversized American car, a 1957 DeSoto Fireflite Convertible, stands in stark contrast to the Fiat driven by the pimp who gives Cabiria a ride into the city centre (Figure 5).³¹ By comparison, Lazzari's vehicle is emblematic not only of his status but also of his success in the current social and economic environment, which makes it possible for him to provide for a wife. The object that makes possible Lazzari's physical mobility is similarly indicative of social mobility, which Cabiria, despite her claims to the contrary, desperately pursues. Cabiria's encounter with Lazzari gives her access to the spaces he inhabits, including



Figure 5. Cabiria takes a ride with Alberto Lazzari in his DeSoto Fireflite Convertible. *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957), Federico Fellini. Retrieved 7 July 2020 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

exclusive clubs and a sumptuous mansion. Yet, for a man who appears to have every material object he could ever desire, Lazzari is perfectly miserable. He is even grouchy and demanding with his girlfriend, whom he spitefully slaps before demanding that Cabiria gets into his car, where she quickly replaces the previous female occupant. After winding her way through Lazzari's impressive home and gazing in awe at his many luxurious belongings, Cabiria experiences further disappointment. She spends the evening in the star's walk-in-wardrobe, attempting to be quiet, whilst he makes love with his girlfriend.³²

The cycle of Cabiria's hopes, first raised and then dashed, repeats itself when Oscar enters her life, eventually asking to marry her. After some hesitation, Cabiria agrees to the marriage, gathering up all her life's savings, selling her home and all her worldly belongings to set up a new domestic sanctuary with her soon to be husband. As she mounts the bus that takes her away from the *borgate*, Cabiria is both triumphant and teary eyed. She bids farewell to her friend Wanda with the reassurance that, '*vedrai che ti succede pure a te un miracolo*'. It is another moment of physical mobility that symbolises the social progress Cabiria anticipates because of her impending marriage. In a cruel twist of fate, the events of the film's opening scenes are duplicated at its finale. Oscar has no intention of marrying his fiancé, but by this point in the protagonist's trajectory he does not need to attempt to murder Cabiria to steal her savings. She willingly hands them over, defeated by the injustice of the betrayal.

Given the lack of a father figure in Cabiria's life, her entrance into the marriage market, as Irigaray defines it, proves problematic. There is no patriarch to appease, nor any

patriarchal lineage to maintain. Despite this lack, Cabiria makes many failed attempts to facilitate her own entrance into this symbolic order, even where she feigns her opposition to it. But her participation in this patriarchal system of the exchange of women is characterised by catastrophes and physical danger. As we have already seen in *'Gli italiani si voltano'*, the closer a woman is to the fringes of society, the more vulnerable she becomes to the commodifying advances of men who understand women as a cheap and accessible source of sexual thrills. Scorned for her societal status, Cabiria is, for her suitors, a disposable object.

Ultimately, Cabiria's quest for redemption through marriage is as fruitless as is the pursuit of spiritual satisfaction in capitalism. At best, each endeavour results in bitter emptiness and dejection; at worst, both lead to financial destitution and physical peril. In this fruitless quest, the female is a dual victim, because, unlike men, she must invest money in her appearance to be a more viable match in marriage. If she is a sex worker, like Cabiria, the onus to consume is trifold, since the sale of her physical body is central to her work, and the embellishments that make her more appealing to clients have an economic and ecological cost. Patriarchal capitalist society feeds upon the conviction that more purchases will bring the possessor closer to physical perfection, and therefore also closer to the safety of successfully securing a spouse. But to accept this solicitation and to pursue the promises of petroculture, whereby so many objects are made of plastic and designed to be quickly replaced, is to be complicit in one's own commodification. As Past writes, commenting on the scene where Cabiria gives up all her worldly possessions with the assurance that she will buy everything new when she is married, 'disposable consumer goods allow for disposable people'.³³ Participation in this patriarchal petroculture is precarious at best, but for a woman like Cabiria, it results in a total removal of her humanity. It makes an object of her; one that can be tossed into rivers or left for dead in a wooded area.

Consequently, the film's melancholy conclusion is not simply a tale of betrayal and destitution within the parameters of the marriage market. Instead, the film's iconic final close-up of Cabiria's face, with dampened eyes and a single mascara-stained tear that marks her cheek, is an image of catharsis. In Past's words, this is a woman who has 'applied the logic of petroleum culture, but failed to fully understand its risks'.³⁴ Having lived through multiple instances of violence, betrayal, and disappointment, and having walked through the homes of those who appear to thrive under petroculture but are in fact miserable, Cabiria is able to visibly purge herself of this patriarchal petroculture. The mascara that makes her a viable product, a by-product of the refining process that makes Esso a particularly profitable business, is washed away by her tears. She turns instead to the travelling folks, musicians, and performers among them, and wanders with them along this street, as she so often does during the film. With the fantasies of domestic bliss now forever dashed, Cabiria is finally free to pursue a truth that is greater than the capitalist myth that has been sold to her.

The Defects of the Consumer Delusion

In several noteworthy films, the intersection of the Esso motif and the treatment of prostitution, whose significance for the commodification of women we have thus far explored, evolves to encompass a discourse that dissects traditional masculinity. Such

is the case in Luchino Visconti's *Le notti bianche* (1957), which features the Esso branding in both its first and last frames.³⁵ In the opening scene, the street is illuminated with various service signs – *Tabacchi, Farmacia, Albergo* – but Esso is the only named brand visible. The street is bustling and brightly lit as Mario (Marcello Mastroianni) disembarks from his bus (Figure 6). He encounters a prostitute, but she has very little to do with the film's central plot. Like the petrol for sale at the Esso stand, she is just one of the many services on offer in the district. Throughout the film, the use of space is notably limited, with scenes set across a small number of adjacent streets. What is telling is that we see none of the expected architectural features that traditionally define the Italian cityscape: no churches, piazzas, or renowned historical sites to inspire awe; no indications of local culture beyond the services one can purchase. The scenes are largely filmed outdoors, and much of the action takes place on deserted pathways or on the commercial high street. The Esso petrol pump is the only recognisable symbol of social interaction, a sign of the capitalist machinations that have taken priority over any cultural antecedents.

Much like the plot of *Le notti di Cabiria*, Mario's trajectory is concerned with the pursuit of true love, and, therefore, marriage. An office clerk, a newcomer in town, and a bachelor who boards in a shared home, Mario leads a life characterised by loneliness despite his proximity to people. As such, he devotes ample time to his twilight meanderings around the unnamed town. This leads to a chance encounter with Natalia, whose existence is equally characterised by her own isolation, as she spends each night waiting, alone on the bridge where Mario first meets her, woefully anticipating her estranged fiancé's return. It is not the nearby high street, with its crowds and its many exuberantly lit advertisements, but rather Natalia, alone on her bridge, who represents the potential for an escape from Mario's empty existence. Despite her repeated resistance, Natalia eventually succumbs to Mario's affections and agrees to become his



Figure 6. An image of the opening scene from *Le notti bianche* (1957), Luchino Visconti. Retrieved 6 July 2020 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

wife at some unspecified point in the future. The agreement is as short-lived as the snow shower that brings a fleeting idealism to the last of their nocturnal appointments. On that very same evening, Natalia's beloved fiancé finally returns, and Mario is powerless to deny her the chance for the pursuit of happiness.³⁶

All that remains for Mario is to continue onwards, alone. He returns to the same petrol stand where the film began. Until the end, he remains the same isolated man, in search of something that the location's many goods and services cannot provide him: the love that he believes will complete his existence is simply not for sale. In the film's closing scene, the street is deserted, its pavement lightly dusted with snow. Mario is alone, aside from a friendly stray dog, and the familiar Esso sign.

When the Esso branding makes a similarly inconspicuous appearance in another film of the same period, it serves as a discreet ideological prompt that regards gendered ideas about work. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961) is a product of the director's fascination with the Roman *borgate* and depicts male characters who embody a dislocated status from the hegemonic classes.³⁷ Its plot centres on the dawdling existence of Vittorio (Franco Citti), more commonly known as Accattone, who, as a pimp, makes a living via the exploitation of young women. Pasolini's choice of protagonist is often understood as a means of depicting a diminishing underclass that simultaneously rejects the dominant narrative of an industrially developed Italy. Accattone, argues Gino Moliterno, lives in

a world marginalized and left behind by history and progress but thus one of the few environments still resistant to the blandishments of the neo-capitalist consumer culture which Pasolini sensed was rapidly bringing about a complete 'anthropological transformation' of Italy through the destruction of its peasant-based culture.³⁸

Accattone sends 'his' women out to make a living on his behalf, whilst he lounges around his neighbourhood and pursues various petty crimes. The fact that he is dependent upon women for his income means that he is a failed product of a patriarchal, capitalist society, which regards male labour – but not female labour – in high esteem. This gendering of labour is underlined by the Esso brand's strategy during this period, when the gas station attendant was perceived as an exclusively male occupation, and one that, in Bini's words, 'advanced a new definition of masculinity and class'.³⁹ When the Esso logo makes its first appearance in the film, it is in the form of a lone Esso petrol pump that stands on the dusty street where the pimp-protagonist meets with a friend (Figure 7).

There are no other brand logos in the shot, nor even any cars, only apartment buildings, tram lines and a handful of people, some of whom are waiting to board. Esso's presence, with its intimations of contemporary conceptions of male labour, thus suggests that Accattone is a lesser man because he does not work. This suggestion is conveyed by the fictions of advertising campaigns of the time, which packaged the career of gas station attendant as a strictly male means of upward mobility. Bini asserts that oil and gas companies sold employees on the idea that they should distance themselves from manual forms of labour as well as from the 'male working-class identity that was associated with mechanical work'.⁴⁰ Notably, in *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), Antonio's son Bruno (Enzo Staiola) is employed at an Esso petrol stand (Figure 8), while Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani) himself cannot maintain his employment after his bike is stolen.



Figure 7. Accattone meets an acquaintance, and an Esso petrol station stands nearby. Accattone (1961), Pier Paolo Pasolini. Retrieved 7 July 2020 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

Antonio is emasculated and disempowered by the fact that his wife and their nine-year-old son are responsible for the family's economic survival, whilst he is completely powerless to support them. Without gainful employment he feels himself a lesser man,



Figure 8. Bruno goes to work as a pump attendant at an Esso petrol stand. (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948), Vittorio De Sica. Retrieved 11 March 2022 from DVD. Screenshot by author.

a feeling induced in him by a patriarchal, capitalist society. Conversely, Accattone is reluctant to find the kind of gainful employment that work as a gas station attendant represents, and when he does acquire a job, he quickly learns that the labour is toilsome and difficult; exploiting the women who fall for his charms as his central source of income is a far easier task. In this way, Accattone is not unlike the various men of *Le notti di Cabiria*, who manipulate women and prostitutes as an alternative to joining the labour force. Accattone is the antithesis of everything that is demanded of an upstanding male citizen according to the Esso brand's logic, and yet the way that he treats the women around him is very much in step with the logic of petroculture and how it considers women. Maddalena, one of the prostitutes who earns money for Accattone, is beaten and left for dead at his behest. Furthermore, when Maddalena refuses to work for Accattone, he simply replaces her with Stella, another destitute woman who is easy to manipulate because she falls in love with her pimp. Evidently, under the logic of patriarchal capitalism, women – and especially prostitutes like Stella, and like Cabiria in Fellini's film – are disposable objects. In the example of *Accattone* they exist to serve a purpose, and when they can no longer fulfil this purpose, they are discarded. The dehumanisation inherent in this disposal takes its most aggressive form with regards to those who find themselves at the bottom of capitalism's hierarchy of mobility. Fundamentally, Accattone holds the same misogynist values peddled by patriarchal capitalism. To him, as to the global economy, vulnerable and impoverished women are of value only insofar as they can produce a profit. That profit, in turn, serves to raise the status of the man to whom it accrues, aiding in his pursuit of a different class of woman, who cannot be exploited in the same way. Thus, when Stella refuses to prostitute herself for Accattone, he must seek out a legitimate means of becoming his family's breadwinner, because he also comprehends the esteem that is attributed to male labour.

Along with the men of his generation, Accattone carries the misogynist beliefs and behaviours of the fascist era with him into petro-modernity, where large corporations, including Esso, carry on the mantle of their totalitarian predecessors. Therefore, when the Esso sign appears in *Accattone* in 1961, it is an early indication of Pasolini's recognition of the societally corrosive structures he wrote about in *Petrolio* (published posthumously in 1995), a novel that explores the psychological workings of fascism in post-war Italian society via the perspective of an employee of a state-controlled oil company.⁴¹

Conclusion

As in *Accattone*, *Le notti bianche*, *Le notti di Cabiria*, and *L'Amore in città*, so too in *La romana* does Esso imagery convey a deeper meaning regarding mobility and its significance for men and women under patriarchal capitalism. As we have seen, during one fleeting sequence, Luigi Zampa's film suggests the transference of societal power, from politics to purchasing, when the profile of the fascist Commander Astarita aligns with a commonplace Esso petrol stand on the rain-dampened streets of Rome's city centre. The long shot that immediately follows the cut away from this encounter shows Astarita stride into an apartment building, briefly passing a lone poster featuring a red-haired, white-skinned woman, clothed in a traditional Dutch dress and wooden

clogs. She is holding up an oversized box of a popular cleaning product with the label 'KOP' (Figure 9). The caption reads: '*fa brillar tutta la casa*': it, or perhaps she, makes the whole house shine. The subject of the sentence is ambiguous, seemingly alluding to both the woman pictured and the soap product she is carrying. The KOP advertisement's domestic image represents what is promised to men and demanded of women: a wife and homemaker. As we have seen in the preceding analysis, the Esso booth participates in the same gendered division of labour that befits patriarchal capitalism's specifications, on the grounds that the Esso corporation regarded the role of gas station attendant as a strictly male profession.

After entering his apartment building, Astarita steps into an elevator and ascends several floors upwards. Upon his exit, he is confronted by his murderous pursuer and a struggle ensues, whereupon the audience watches from high above him as he plummets to his death at the centre of the apartment block's staircase. In the space of these two shots, fifteen seconds of footage, the film emblematises the historical demise of fascism and the swiftness with which capitalism was able to supplant it. Recall that, following Mussolini's execution, his body was strung up, alongside the bodies of his mistress and other fascist followers, from an abandoned Esso station in Milan's Piazzale Loreto. In *La romana*, the fascist functionary Astarita's fall, in close



Figure 9. KOP Original Vintage Advertisement (1952), lithograph, measures approximately 8.26"x12.20," printed by Ultra, Milan, Italy.

proximity to the Esso booth, may have reminded viewers of Benito Mussolini's imperious reign and ignominious end, while drawing their attention to the symbols of a capitalist order whose empire continued to expand after the war.

In this essay, I have asserted that the Esso logo's presence in the cinema of the economic boom connotes a hierarchy of mobility that is both socially and physically constituted, that forces the poorest and most disenfranchised to its lowermost rungs. This hierarchy is sustained via the proximity to, or alienation from, a power that is determined by financial means. Esso, a global conglomerate, is a symbol of wealth and the promise of individual prosperity that is very rarely achieved. That hierarchy, I have argued, is always gendered. For women like *La romana's* Adriana, whose seamstress business is not lucrative enough to raise herself and her mother out of poverty, prostitution, not petrol, offers the only plausible route to the financial stability that the Esso logo promises. As we see in *La romana* and in other films of the period, prostitution both exemplifies and admonishes the moral state of the Italian nation. The prostitute sells sex and capitalises upon her own commodification, at least to the extent that she is not exploited by a pimp. Whether this work was the result of personal choice or oppressive societal circumstances, it provided more financial stability to many than the available societally respectable jobs would have offered. Although the characters I analyse inhabit a landscape that bears the mark of this multinational petrol company, and although they are pictured in scenes where the use of oil is required to facilitate the use of vehicles, the Esso logo offers only false promises because they are alienated from its benefits.

The Esso logo still marks the Italian landscape. In 1966, Esso began the construction of a \$9-million office building on the outskirts of Rome, a district still known as EUR in recognition of its intended original function – unfulfilled under fascism – as the site of the *Esposizione Universale Roma*. Today an array of companies, including Eni, an Italian multinational oil and gas company, choose to situate their headquarters amongst the EUR district's well-preserved fascist-era architecture. *La romana* may be said, even now, to have something to say to those who pass by this monument to global petroculturalism, located within a monument to Italian fascism.

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Notes

1. *La romana*, dir. by Luigi Zampa (Minerva Film, 1954).
2. On the relationship of objects to characters in cinematic narratives see Rosamaria Salvatore, "'Il dorso delle cose" nel cinema di Pietrangeli', *Fata Morgana*, 10.28 (2006), 202–16.
3. For more on *La Romana*, see Michael Hanne, 'Alberto Moravia's *La Romana*: The Appropriation of Female Experience', *Italica*, 60.4 (1983), 351–59; Charles L. Leavitt IV, 'Repressed Memory and

- Traumatic History in Alberto Moravia's *The Woman of Rome*, in *Transmissions of Memory: Echoes, Traumas, and Nostalgia in Post-World War II Italian Culture*, ed. by Patrizia Sambuco (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018), pp. 39–54; Alberto Moravia, *La Romana* (Milan: Bompiani, 2017); and Thomas E. Peterson, 'Woman as Object: Language and Gender in the Work of Alberto Moravia', *Italica*, 69.3 (1992) 436–39.
4. On women's lives under fascism, see Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
 5. Although there are examples of male prostitution in Italian cinema, the films I have selected feature the act of prostitution as performed by women only.
 6. On prostitution in post-war Italian cinema, see Russell Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Franco G. Casadio, *Adultere, fedifraghe, innocenti: la donna del 'neorealismo popolare' nel cinema italiano degli anni Cinquanta* (Ravenna: Longo, 1990); Marga Cottino-Jones, *Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Danielle Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women: Gender and Prostitution in Italian Cinema, 1940–1965* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016); Penelope Morris, *Women in Italy, 1945–1960: An Interdisciplinary Study* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Ellen Nerenberg, "'Love for Sale" or "That's Amore": Representing Prostitution During and After Italian Fascism', *Annali D'Italianistica*, 16 (1998), 213–35; and Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, *Sex, the Self, and the Sacred: Women in the Cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
 7. Molly Tambour, 'Prostitutes and Politicians: The Women's Rights Movement in the Legge Merlin Debates', in *Women in Italy, 1945–1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*, ed. by Penelope Morris (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 131–145 (p. 137). According to Tambour, Giancarlo Fusco originally referred to the prostitutes he knew in Genova as '*operaie della seduzione*'. For further information on the history of prostitution in Italy, see Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860–1915* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press) and Sophie Day, Judith Kilvington, and Helen Ward, 'Prostitution Policy in Europe: A Time of Change?', *Feminist Review*, 67 (2001), 28–93.
 8. On the significance of spatial organization in cinema see Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
 9. In August 1948, when Angela Merlin made her original proposal to abolish the *case chiuse*, or brothel system, in Italy, there was a collective conviction that the civic regulation of prostitution and fascism were inextricably interlinked. Though all but one of the films referenced in this essay were created during the decade of debate on the *Legge Merlin*, their relationship with the law and the potential commentary they could provide on its implementation are not the central focus of my analysis.
 10. Millicent Marcus, 'The Italian Body Politic Is a Woman: Feminized National Identity in Postwar Italian Film', in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Afterlife: Essays in Honour of John Freccero*, ed. by Dana E. Stewart and Alison Cornish (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2000), pp. 329–47 (pp. 335–36).
 11. Danielle Hipkins, "'I Don't Want to Die": Prostitution and Visconti's Narrative Disruption in Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*', in *Women in Italy, 1945–1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*, ed. by Penelope Morris (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 193–210 (p. 194).
 12. For further historical background on the economic boom and its inequalities in post-war Italy, see Mario Cardano and others, 'Internal Migration and Mental Health of the Second Generation: The Case of Turin in the Age of the Italian Economic Miracle', *Social Science & Medicine*, 208 (2018), 142–49; Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Stephen Gundle, "'We Have Everything to Learn from the Americans": Film Promotion, Product Placement and Consumer Culture in Italy, 1945–1965', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 40.1 (2020), 55–83.
 13. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures: Language, Discourse, Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 6–18 (p. 4).
 14. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 93–119 (pp. 105–07).

15. Claire Thora Solomon, *Fictions of the Bad Life: The Naturalist Prostitute and Her Avatars in Latin American Literature, 1880–2010* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2014), p. 82.
16. Only one episode, Fellini's '*Agenzia matrimoniale*', features a male protagonist, but even here the plot is presented as an exposé of sorts that develops into the psychological exploration of a young woman's pursuit of marriage. For more on *L'Amore in città* (specifically the '*Gli italiani si voltano*' episode, see John David Rhodes, 'Watching Italians Turn Around: Gender, Looking, and Roman/Cinematic Modernity', in *A Companion to Italian Cinema*, ed. by Frank Burke (West Sussex: John Wiley & Son, 2017), pp. 408–26.
17. On this episode see Ivone Margulies, 'Neorealist Reenactment as Postwar Pedagogy', in *In Person: Reenactment in Post-War and Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 37–76.
18. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at The University of Texas at Austin, 'ExxonMobil Historical Collection', *Texas Archival Resources Online*, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20140109191218/http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utcah/00352/cah-00352.html>> [accessed 22 January 2022]. On the history of oil exploration in Italy, see Eni Press, 'History of Oil Exploration in Italy', *eni.com*, <<https://www.eni.com/en-IT/about-us/history-oil-exploration-italy.html>> [accessed 22 July 2020].
19. Elisabetta Bini, 'Selling Gasoline with a Smile: Gas Station Attendants between the United States, Italy, and the Third World, 1945–1970', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 81 (2012), 69–93 (p. 70).
20. Natalie Fullwood, 'Popular Italian Cinema, the Media, and the Economic Miracle: Rethinking *Commedia all'italiana*', *Modern Italy*, 18 (2013), 19–39 (p. 22).
21. *L'Amore in città*, dir. by Michelangelo Antonioni and others (Faro Films, 1953).
22. Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women*, p. 405.
23. Cesare Zavattini and others, *Cinema: Diario cinematografico, Neorealismo ecc.* (Milano: Bompiani, 2002), p. 722.
24. Bini, p. 70.
25. An alternative view is offered by Manzoli, who understands this scene as demonstrative of the ambivalent relations between men and women, the latter of whom he believes to be very much in charge of the game of exchanging glances and who derive a sense of esteem and social capital from being looked at by male passers-by. Giacomo Manzoli, 'Italians do it worse: *La crisi della mascolinità, da Brancati a Buzzanca, Da Ercole a Fantozzi*', ed. by Giacomo Manzoli, (Roma: Carocci, 2012), pp. 161–91.
26. Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the Market', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 799–811 (p. 799).
27. *Le notti di Cabiria*, dir. by Federico Fellini (Criterion Collection, 1999). On *Le notti di Cabiria*, see R. J. Cardullo, 'The Artistic Achievement of Federico Fellini: *The Nights of Cabiria* as Exemplum', in *Teaching Sound Film* (Brill Sense, 2016), pp. 73–88; and Iddo Landau, '*The Nights of Cabiria* as a Camusian Existentialist Text', *Film and Philosophy*, 16 (2012), 53–69.
28. John David Rhodes, *Stupendous Miserable City: Pasolini's Rome* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 2.
29. In Elena M. Past, 'Environmental Fellini: Petroculture, the Anthropocene, and the Road', *A Companion to Federico Fellini*, ed. by Frank Burke, Marguerite Waller, and Marita Gubareva (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), pp. 347–60 (p. 348), the author explains that the term 'petroculture' (or petroleum culture) refers to the decades of human history that feature the advent of the Anthropocene – in which Fellini was most active as a filmmaker – that coincide with an identifiable increase in the use of petroleum and petroleum-based products, such as vehicles and time-saving domestic appliances. On the concept of Italians adapting to the lifestyle of the economic boom and post-war industrialization see also Paola Bonifazio, 'United We Drill: ENI, Films, and the Culture of Work', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 32 (2014), 329–50.
30. Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women*, p. 381.
31. In his analysis of *Le notti di Cabiria*, Alberto Zambenedetti discusses Amedeo Nazzari as an important on-screen persona in 1960s Italian cinema, a historical period in film that is

- 'singularly predicated on vehicular mobilities'. Zambenedetti notes that when Lazzari signals Cabiria to get into his car, he promotes her 'from *flâneuse* to passenger of an ostentatious, imported automobile', a change in status that emblematises the differences in social status between mobility on foot and mobility in cars. Zambenedetti, *Acting Across Borders: Mobility and Identity in Italian Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 107–08.
32. *Le notti di Cabiria*, dir. by Federico Fellini (Criterion Collection, 1999).
 33. Past, p. 352.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
 35. On *Le notti bianche*, see Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).
 36. *Le notti bianche*, dir. by Luchino Visconti (Rank Film Distributors of Italy, 1957).
 37. On *Accattone*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Water Bearer Films, 1961), see John David Rhodes, 'Scandalous Desecration': *Accattone* Against the Neorealist City', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 45.1 (2004), 7–33.
 38. Gino Moliterno, 'Accattone', *Senses of Cinema*, 31 (2004), <<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/accattone/>> [accessed 19 August 2020].
 39. Bini, p. 70.
 40. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 41. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio* (Torino: Einaudi, 1992). The documentary film *Nero Petrolio*, dir. by Roberto Olla (BiBi Film, 2010), posits that the novel illustrates Pasolini's awareness of the connections between fascism, the Cosa Nostra and Sinclair Oil (one of the largest oil companies in the world), and that this awareness explains why Pasolini was targeted and brutally murdered on 2 November 1975. For a critical study of the novel, see Carla Benedetti, Manuele Gragnolati, and Davide Luglio, *Petrolio 25 anni dopo: (bio)politica, eros e verità nell'ultimo romanzo di Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020).