
That Obscure Commodity of Desire: The Lure to Labor in Italian Film from the "dopoguerra" to the "sorpasso"

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Italian Labor History: A Premise

Coming out of World War II with strong leftist leanings, Italian cinema produced a number of films addressing the social processes involved in the country's rapid industrialization. The cinematic attention devoted to this economic growth, commonly known as *il boom*, extended to observations regarding its concomitant burgeoning labor market and its development towards an ever increasingly consumerist culture that, *mutatis mutandis*, characterized the epoch from the late 1940s to the late 1980s.² During this half century, the country rose from the rubble of the post-war period, the so-called *dopoguerra*, when its workforce offered relatively inexpensive labor for markets in northern and western Europe, to the much-touted *sorpasso*, or economic overtaking. At this time, Italian standards of living were reconfigured to include its underground economy, showing that Italian per capita income had surpassed that of Great Britain. Donald Sassoon observes, "The years 1985-1987 were a period of euphoria and consumption. Italian GNP became larger — or so it was claimed — than that of the UK. This event was called the *sorpasso* and filled Italians with much needed national pride" (75). As a result, by 1987, Italy had the world's fifth wealthiest economy, which it maintained until 1991 when it overtook France to rise one more spot in the economic index (Signoretti 5). The *sorpasso* fostered an era in which even relatively modest households held designer clothing in their wardrobes, and aspired to the purchase of a *seconda casa* for mountain or beach vacations.³ This relative affluence was buoyed by a

¹ The Editors sincerely regret the sudden death of Dr. William Van Watson on May 8, 2014, at the age of 55. They are happy to publish posthumously this essay, which Dr. Watson had already submitted to them when he was still teaching at the University of Arizona.

² For an overall assessment of this period, I refer to Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*.

³ Marchi described this phenomenon in his book *Non siamo più povera gente. I malesseri dell'Italia del grande benessere*. As the title states, the changed financial status of most Italians, while reducing a previously endemic inferiority complex Italians had vis-à-vis other Western European countries and economies, created a host of new issues related to this sudden spike in affluence.

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burgeoning high-end export market, with Italian-owned stores and designer retail shops supplanting many French ones on New York's Park Avenue (Haberman). Exports to the United States alone increased by 46% during only the first half-decade of the Bettino Craxi era in the 1980s (Sassoon 55).

Among the factors that spurred this growth, which allowed employment and the GNP virtually to double in the decade and a half after World War II, was the abolition of Fascist laws prohibiting internal migration (Sassoon 30; Crainz 13). The case of Fiat, whose labor force increased four times its previous size during the 1950s alone, proves emblematic of what Steve Wright calls "the growing application of Henry Ford's productive innovations to Northern industry during the 1950s" (55). Already in the 1930s, Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci presented his somewhat idealized vision of a Fordist economy wherein "[h]egemony is born in the factory" as laborers were paid sufficient wages to enable them to become consumers (285). Henry Ford's idea had been to pay his workers enough for them to buy one of his own vehicles so that, as Gramsci noticed "so-called 'high wages' [become] a transitory form of remuneration" because these wages are returned to the capitalist through the purchase of the commodity (310). Gramsci foresaw that "[t]he result of this would be a larger internal market" and hoped that, by being reconceived as consumers, "the technical element, management and workers, [w]ould be more important than the 'capitalist' element" (291). Wright notices, however, that FIAT's institution of Fordist policies provided quite different results:

In these years, FIAT met with a certain success in projecting a new identity of high wages, valuable skills and dynamic career structures to overshadow its traditional reputation as a ruthless employer. If for some it embodied all that was benign about the Italian "miracle", for many on the left, by contrast, FIAT evoked images of poor working conditions, company unionism, and a docile workforce besotted with consumerism.

(47)

Despite Gramsci, the "transitory" nature of the workers' wages as transmuted into the consumer's purchase price merely assured the dominance of capital itself. Furthermore, the lure of the commodity in a pervasively consumerist culture only served to render the workforce more "docile" and malleable.

Economic historians have argued that *il boom* of the 1950s resulted in large measure from the lower cost of Italian labor vis-à-vis that of other countries (Crainz 35; Earle 117; Sassoon 29), though they agree that, by the 1960s, this particular aspect of Italian labor costs would change (Crainz 452; Earle 135; Sassoon 29). This is when the *operaismo*, or workerism, of Mario Tronti and Luisa Muraro, inspired in part by the ideas of Marxist political philosopher Antonio Negri, spread throughout the country. Wright has described workerism "as an assault upon the heavens of class rule" (4). If Marxism was the theory, workerism was the practice. Tronti noted that "the only thing which does not come from the workers is, precisely, [the conditions of] labour" and workerism

was an attempt to remedy this issue (“Toward a Critique” 30-31). The growth of the Italian Communist Party and of trade unionism during the post-war era had developed a class of meta-labor bureaucrats that often seemed more concerned with itself, its own survival, and its own theories, bylaws and rules, than with the working conditions in the factory or with workers’ rights. This in turn led to “many young workers rejecting the union’s demands as abstract, formulated by bureaucrats ‘in Rome’ themselves subservient to politicians” (Wright 49), operating in a system made up of what Negri described as “completely bureaucratized” institutions functional only to capital itself” (53). Alberto Toscano claims that “what was at stake was no longer the participation in the nationalist and productivist agenda of progress and negotiation, but rather the unilateral demand for the *immediate* satisfaction of workers’ needs” (“Chronicles of Insurrection” 114). To this end, Tronti and Muraro advocated “guerilla” actions and “transformative practice,” which most often took the form of a strike or purposeful absenteeism (Chiesa and Toscano 19). The result were over 300 million strike hours in the country during the infamous “hot autumn” of 1969, the so-called *scioperi selvaggi* at FIAT in 1970, and an absenteeism rate of 25% in major industries by the mid-1970s (Crainz 435; Earle 118; Sassoon 55).

Work and Labor in Italian Cinema: From Ladri di biciclette to Ladri di saponette

Despite its leftist leanings, representation of actual work in Italian cinema during the forty years that span the 1940s to the 1980s remains somewhat limited. Instead, it is the desire for the commodity as the lure to labor, which more often drives the plot dynamics of many period films that address working-class life. Among them are the movies I discuss in this essay: *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), *Il cappotto* (1952), *Il posto* (1960), *Renzo e Luciana* (1962), *Il pollo ruspante* (1962), *L’automobile* (1971), *Delitto d’amore* (1974), *Tutto a posto, niente in ordine* (1974), *Storia d’amore* (1986), and *Ladri di saponette* (1989). In accord with Marxist concepts regarding the alienation of modern labor, in most of these movies desire for a manufactured good or commodity as a material reward for labor has supplanted any ostensible sense of accomplishment obtained through work itself. Moreover, as Guy Debord argues in his landmark book *The Society of Spectacle*, desire for the commodity has also supplanted more intimate human interaction since consumerist culture results in “a social relation among people mediated by images” reinforced through the apparition/appearance of the commodity itself (10). Thus, not only do interpersonal interactions become mere forms of “reciprocal alienation” through the products themselves (11), but consumerist culture constitutes the “historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (25). In Debord’s words, “The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life has brought into the definition of all human realization an obvious degradation of being into having”

(13).

Vittorio De Sica's landmark film *Ladri di biciclette*, whose protagonist attempts desperately to enter the work force, and Maurizio Nichetti's pastiche of De Sica's film, *Ladri di saponette* (1989), whose protagonist remains buried beneath a heap of consumer products, serve as convenient cinematic bookends for this period. That said, the unlacing of the Fordist labor society of *Ladri di biciclette* into the consumerist culture of *Ladri di saponette* is already implicitly contained in the first film. As Sante Matteo has noticed about De Sica's movie, "[t]he bike therefore has also become a commodity with capital value — property that can be sold or stolen" (329). In *Ladri di biciclette* Antonio eagerly wants to work to establish his enfranchisement within society, but the bicycle means even more. Its brand is Fides, meaning "faith," and as such it represents his faith not only in society, but also in himself. His son Bruno's faith in him is always unflinching, as evinced in Bruno's attentiveness to his father's bicycle, his awareness that it has been scratched, his knowledge of its serial number, etc. Nichetti's Bruno, by contrast, pays almost no attention to his father's bicycle. Unlike De Sica's Maria, whose tearful response to the news of the bicycle theft prompts the first extreme close-up in the film, Nichetti's Maria repeatedly slams the door, causing the bicycle to fall and, thus metaphorically, mocking and knocking down Antonio's faith in himself. In De Sica's film, on his way to work, Antonio drops off Bruno at a gas station, where he readily becomes busy, thereby showing that, early in his life, he has joined the labor force as an apprentice, like many other Italian children of his time. Nichetti plays upon the precocious diligence of De Sica's Bruno by exaggerating "his" Bruno into an absurd hyper-worker, who labors not only at a gas pump, but also cleans the sacristy as an altar boy, makes doorbells by hand at home, and even cooks the family's cabbage dinner in the kitchen. Maria self-delusively proclaims that "Bruno likes to work"; but as soon as he can escape into a world of consumerist abundance, lured by the sugar high of a Big-Big candy bar that makes him salivate, he makes his getaway.

Nichetti's Bruno is not alone in his take on labor. Actual work or labor in films of this period often appears as drudgery or worse. In Alberto Lattuada's *Il cappotto*, the protagonist Carmine attempts to elevate the mind-numbing, rote copying that constitutes his clerical labor to a more engaging and personally rewarding artisan level by scripting Gothic calligraphy. The clerks in Ermanno Olmi's *Il posto* find their labor similarly stultifying, as they fiddle with their note cards, cigarette holders, combs, and other paraphernalia on their desks, childishly resorting to throwing wadded-up paper at one another in an effort to maintain some degree of consciousness and alertness. The smallness of their restless movements, lacking any real dynamism, and their continual distraction toward and away from the quotidian picayune allow Olmi to communicate the interminable tedium of their work in only a few minutes of film time. The subtlety of sound in these otherwise almost silent sequences purposefully lacks

any aural interest for the same reason. Even the protagonist Domenico, in his first occupation in the company as a messenger, mostly finds himself seated at a desk waiting with little or nothing to do but look at a blank wall. Similarly, the character of Luciana in Mario Monicelli's *Renzo e Luciana* also performs clerical work. She toils as a bookkeeper seemingly attached to her adding machine and subject to the policing gaze of her boss Osvaldo and others as they pass along the windowed inner walls that form the prison-like panopticon of her work space (Foucault 210).⁴ As revealed through the character of Osvaldo, this predatory gaze insists on focusing on Luciana's relentless attachment to her machine, relieved only by the occasional gossip with her co-workers, which cannot be heard outside the glass walls. Alfredo Giannetti's *L'automobile* avoids the workplace altogether by making its protagonist Anna a retired prostitute, although the repeated appearance of other streetwalkers and the predatory gaze of various older gentlemen, not unlike that of Osvaldo toward Luciana, serve as nagging reminders of what her life previously had been. Even when work is primarily physical, with the potential for dynamic movement and editing, such as that of Bruna as a cleaning woman in Francesco Maselli's *Storia d'amore* (1986), it is generally given visual short shrift in most labor-oriented films of this period.

Workers' Interlude: Wertmüller's and Comencini's Cinematic Labor

Though work is not particularly interesting from a dramatic standpoint, two films show some visual interest in labor through the kinetics inherent in the cinematic medium itself by using montage sequences that harken back to the Soviet tradition of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1924). These are Lina Wertmüller's *Tutto a posto, niente in ordine* and Luigi Comencini's *Delitto d'amore*. Wertmüller creates a virtual butcher's ballet, showing the mass meat processing and butchery of cattle by the characters Gigi, Carletto, and their co-workers. This parodic ballet involves the interaction of the workers, the machinery, and the product, all set to classical music in an oddly graceful and carefully choreographed display, as the carcasses, hung from hooks on a Fordist assembly line, are split open and then cut apart. More traditional in its use of montage, *Delitto d'amore* always shows Stefania Sandrelli, as the character Carmela Santoro, fully integrated with and controlled by the actions and motions of the machines around her as she works on the assembly line of a factory making metal canisters. Comencini deploys these montage sequences to show how

⁴ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses the panopticon as the ideal prison design in which a minimal number of guards can survey and police a maximum number of prisoners. Any privacy of the prisoners is thereby compromised and surveillance itself constitutes a form of discipline.

machines have reduced the human condition and, in this sense, reflects Herbert Marcuse's observation that "the machine process imposes upon men the patterns of mechanical behavior" ("Implications" 145) and Romano Alquati's discernment of "la scomposizione tecnica sempre più spinta" deployed in compartmentalizing work, even as such compartmentalization inhibits the development of solidarity among the workers (74). Accordingly, although Carmela labors in the middle of a factory filled with workers, she basically works alone. Already in his *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx himself had warned of "the transformation of the means of labour into machinery, and of living labour into a mere living accessory to this machinery" (693). Comencini illustrates and condemns this phenomenon of industrial life. The montage sequences focus on the interaction of the machinery with Carmela's hands in particular, as one of her bosses tells her, "a worker only needs hands," thereby diminishing her into part of the machinery with which she works.

In *Delitto d'amore* the union representative Nullo claims, "Works sucks your blood like a vampire." In the film, Fordist labor does not merely appear as a fate worse than death; it literally brings death. Early on, a close up of dying plants outside the factory serves as an omen of what is to come, as the gardener who fusses over them blames the industrial exhaust fumes for their sorry state. In an effort to coordinate her work schedule with Nullo's, Carmela takes a job in the company's oven section, whose otherworldly neon lights, replete with colors from a Bunsen burner chemical experiment, hint at the toxicity of the space, much as Antonioni, a decade earlier, had alluded to the noxious industrial environment with his use of unnatural colors in *Il deserto rosso* (1964). When Carmela's health begins to fail, the factory doctor wants to transfer her to the packaging section, which would provide her with better quality air, but she refuses, as the job would also lower her pay. During an outing with Nullo, they come to a formerly beautiful natural area where Nullo used to play as a child on the now poisoned Lambro River. Comencini commented, "The industrialization of this land does not take into account human needs" (252). In an unapologetic manner, the environmentally conscious Comencini shows the proliferation of trash, the dead and rotting fish, and the foaming pollution in the swirling eddies of the current that manufacturing has brought to the Lombard countryside. In this contaminated setting, Carmela pointedly speaks of her desire eventually to have children, but she finds only dead baby birds, which she picks up and buries. The juxtaposition between her words and the accompanying images foreshadows her death by the end of the film. Her marriage bed, which should bring the promise of a new generation, will instead bury her dreams as her deathbed. Carmela has labored in a factory because she has aspired to the better life in the north, a northern life, with a northern spouse, and a northern lifestyle, but instead she ends up with no life at all. McGowan indicts deaths such as Carmela's: "In a society of enjoyment, death becomes an increasingly horrific [...] event. Not only does death imply a cessation of one's being, but it also

indicates a failure of enjoyment” (85). Carmela did not attain the commodities she desired. With the exception of her sexual relationship with Nullo, she repeatedly deferred her pleasure, even denying herself the milk she received at work to give it to her younger brothers.

With Nullo as a union representative and Carmela suffering due to an unsanitary workplace, Comencini’s film exhibits many of the issues and concerns raised by the workerist discourses of Tronti and Muraro current at the time, since many of the strikes of the “hot autumn” of 1969 had been specifically about workers’ safety. In addition, Luisa Muraro had concerned herself with the previously unacknowledged parallels between the exploitation of the worker by capital and that of the female by the male. Comencini points this out in the absurd figure of Carmela’s brother, Pasquale, who, as a communist, laments his exploitation as a worker, but who, as a southerner, believes to be entirely within his rights to police his adult sister and to insist on her subservience, even within the setting of the local party headquarters. To a lesser extent, Bruna in *Storia d’amore* suffers the same fate, as her widowed communist father fully expects her to play the traditional female role of homemaker and take care of her two younger brothers as surrogate mother, even though she already has a full-time job outside the household.

“Ladri di saponette” and the Erasure of the Existential Self

While capitalism erases the subject biologically in *Delitto d’amore*, this process functions more existentially in *Ladri di saponette*. At the conclusion of the film, Maurizio Nichetti finds himself trapped by a proliferation of consumer goods, a fitting visual metaphor of the death of the subject in poststructuralist and postmodernist theory. Karl Marx presciently noted: “The rule of the person over the person now becomes the universal rule of the thing over the person, the product over the producer” (“Excerpts” 270; *emph. in original*). Indeed, Nichetti remains practically hidden, obscured from view, behind all the overfilled shopping carts loaded with products in Antonio’s kitchen. His erasure from the frame becomes complete when the modern mother turns off the television set, supreme icon of the consumerist culture, and his image disappears from view, his voice silenced altogether. In his gloss on the theories of Herbert Marcuse, T. W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, Ben Agger claims that “subjectivity in late capitalism is whittled down to near-nothingness” (41). In *Ladri di saponette*, Nichetti aspires to be an auteur or maestro in the manner of De Sica or Federico Fellini. However, the film sabotages such a lofty stature for the director from the outset. While Fellini may have falsified his childhood biography as part of his self-mythologizing process to declare that he had run away with the circus, Nichetti presents himself as a virtual clown, dressed in oversized shoes, baggy pants, and a striped shirt, in partial homage to Charlie Chaplin. The costume mistress at the television station further impugns his potency by commenting on how “small” he is as she holds up the crotch of his torn pair of pants. Far from

being an articulating subject in the manner of Fellini or De Sica, Nichetti, then, with his film-within-a-film becomes just another articulated object, another product in the consumer culture of the modern family's television set, sandwiched somewhere between films by John Frankenheimer and Jean-Pierre Melville in the medium's incoherent 1980s' flow of interspersed commercial advertising and canonized art film images. Like Fellini, who in 1985 brought a suit against Silvio Berlusconi's Canale 5 for its callous editing of his films to accommodate advertisements during their televisual transmission ("Fellini vs. Berlusconi"), Nichetti berates the commercial disruptions that impact the screening and thus the meaning of his film-within-a-film. The compulsory gleefulness of these disruptions compromises and even contradicts the serious tone of his work and even changes its message. Narrative pollution results in ideological pollution when Heidi, and the commercial world she represents, dives into the 1980s' color swimming pool, only to surface in the 1940s' black-and-white river where Antonio searches for Maria. By the end of the film, Nichetti bangs on the inside of the television screen, howling for the attention and respect he does not receive. A shot from his perspective employs a fish-eye lens suggesting the curvature of the television screen. Another shot equates Nichetti with the goldfish in the fish bowl that sits beside the television set, swimming around and around senselessly, but in perpetual motion in order to secure its own survival and pointless existence. In the end, Nichetti's auteurist message has been contained and neutralized by television, and then turned off altogether.

As a pastiche of *Ladri di biciclette*, Nichetti's film both parodies and pays homage to the earlier work. The English term "pastiche" derives from the Italian word "pasticcio," which can also mean "mess," and Nichetti's film certainly makes an ideological mess of De Sica's original. Like De Sica, Nichetti attempts to produce a *cinema d'impegno* or *cinéma engagé* that addresses the socioeconomic issues of his day much as his predecessor had done forty years earlier. In De Sica's film Antonio desperately attempts to enter the working class, but Nichetti's film catapults Antonio into the consumer class, seemingly rendering the struggles and the social issues addressed in De Sica's film obsolete, irrelevant, and nonsensical. In Nichetti's film, the priest, Don Italo, a perversion of Roberto Rossellini's Don Pietro from *Roma, città aperta* (1945), tells Antonio that his missing wife Maria and son Bruno, believed deceased, "have gone to a better place." This supposed paradise is actually the world of consumer product advertisements, as Maria and Bruno ecstatically make their way from one television commercial to another, culminating in a final slow-motion parody of a love embrace between the two. Still, Nichetti maintains some ideological integrity vis-à-vis De Sica's original by representing Heidi, Bruno, and Maria's arrival with their cornucopia of consumer goods at the end of the film as an overt and problematic *deus ex machina*, since the narrative of the film-within-a-film offers no answers as to how they paid for this

merchandise. In temporally sliding from the post-war era to the *sorpasso* of this happily-ever-after orgy of commodity culture, Nichetti glaringly sidesteps the issue of indebtedness that perpetually plagues the consumer.

In *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*, Todd McGowan declares his theory of consumerist society: “Whereas formerly society had required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment in the name of social duty, today the only duty seems to consist in enjoying oneself as much as possible” (2). The American model Heidi serves as the chief envoy of this televisual consumerist culture, pushing the shopping carts with the young Bruno and rhapsodizing about the products. Heidi’s half-naked body, as Maria calls it, combined with Bruno’s sly smile, and Heidi’s own charming stutter on her declaration regarding herself and Bruno that “*Ci divertiamo insieme*” (“We enjoy ourselves”), confirm her *raison d’être* to be the deployment of sex in the service of capitalism. In fact, she first appears in a commercial for an unspecified product whose actual identity (most likely either a car or a swimming pool) remains of secondary importance compared to the fact that it is marketed through sexual desire with her scantily clad body as a conduit. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has noted that consumerism “is *an order of the dispersed [défoulé]*, an idealism of desire and the libido” (*Symbolic* 137, *emph. in original*).⁵ Moreover, he has argued, “[s]exuality itself has become part of life, which means that it, too, no longer has transcendent value, neither as prohibition, nor as principle of analysis, pleasure, or transgression. It has been ‘ecologized,’ psychologized, secularized for domestic use” (*America* 92). As Walter Davis puts it, images of “the primitive, the vital, the liberatory, the erotic — these are now thoroughly colonized matters,” and colonized by capital, in particular (283).

Marcuse also noted in *Eros and Civilization*, that the body, “no longer used as a full-time instrument of labor, [...] would be resexualized,” but again as sexuality in the service of capital (201). In other words, the sexuality of the consumer is marketed back to itself, not most importantly as is obvious through such products as pornography or sex toys, but rather much more pervasively and profoundly through the marketing of commodities associated with this sexuality, such as the car or swimming pool in the case of Heidi’s initial appearance. The process is relatively simple. The commercial presents Heidi’s body as the object of desire, a sexual or at least sensory stimulus. She is presented with, and enjoying, a commodity — driving the car, diving into the swimming pool.

⁵ In a similar fashion, Italian director and author Pier Paolo Pasolini intuited, “Oggi la libertà sessuale della maggioranza è in realtà una convenzione, un obbligo, un dovere sociale, un’ansia sociale, una caratteristica irrinunciabile della qualità di vita del consumatore” (“Il coito, l’aborto” 50). With the commercial success of his overtly sexually celebratory *Trilogia della vita* films, Pasolini inadvertently implicated himself in this process of “false tolerance,” which actually enlisted the sexuality of the consumer in the service of capital. For this reason, he renounced the films in his famous “Abiura.”

Implicitly, the consumer believes the pleasure promised by the apparition of Heidi can be attained through purchase of the product associated with her. In essence, Heidi whets the appetite. Mario Mieli comments: “Il capitale liberalizza il desiderio incanalandolo in un alveo consumistico” (110). At issue here is how capitalism can transform the energy of the masses not only into labor power as in classic capitalism, wherein the masses are conceived primarily as workers, but also into leisure power, wherein the masses are conceived primarily as consumers. As Debord has argued, commodity capitalism requires the “surplus collaboration of the worker’ as a consumer” (26). What had evolved in the interim, in the period from Benito to Bettino, to use a rough Italian parallel, in order to facilitate this socioeconomic transformation? Television, as Ugo Gregoretti’s film *Il pollo ruspante* makes clear.

Ugo Gregoretti’s Il pollo ruspante, Tutto a posto, niente in ordine and Television Television has proven integral to the development of consumer culture, as it supplanted storytelling, theatre, and film as the primary forum for the negotiation of social and cultural values in the form of performed narrative. In performed narrative, characters embody, express, or espouse various values, beliefs, and ideologies in any given society. These characters interact, becoming entangled in conflict, just as the ideologies they represent are in conflict. When plots resolve, the ideologies in conflict presumably resolve as well. Performed narratives were first disseminated through storytelling, theatre, and finally film, but the entire ideological and cultural function of performed narrative breaks down with the advent of television. Consumers purchasing a television are not buying a performed narrative that debates opposing social and cultural values. Instead, they are buying a commodity that functions primarily as an advertising medium, which thereby enfranchises them within consumerism. Television transmits a seemingly infinite amount of performed narratives whose ideological positions differ radically. However, containing all these texts is the hypertext of television itself, so that the only consistent and, consequently, coherent message of television derives from the recurrent advertisements that themselves disrupt the programs. Actually, from a purely consumeristic point of view, it is the televisual programs that disrupt the advertising. Narrative programming exists only because commercials exist, and not vice-versa. All other ideologies become subordinate to the overarching narrative of consumerism itself. Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Horkheimer observe, “Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically” so that “the insistent demand for effectiveness makes technology into psycho-technology, and a procedure for manipulating men,” for ultimately “the object is to overpower the consumer” (163).

Ugo Gregoretti’s *Il pollo ruspante* serves as a case in point, as Gregoretti attempts to stand outside this process, to observe, study, and assess it. The film portrays a Harvard professor, Dr. Pizzorno, who presents a Frankfurt School-

based analysis of the burgeoning consumerist culture of television. Intercut with his lecture are scenes of a representative family of the period in accordance with the socially engaged principles of neorealist filmmaking. These sections begin with the father, played by Ugo Tognazzi (who remains unnamed in the film to emphasize his universality), as he shops in a television store. With a proliferation of television sets in the background, he asks the saleswoman about the features and the prices of the newer, sleeker models, since consumer culture relies on built-in obsolescence to perpetuate its viability as an economic model. He returns home to find his children glued to the television set wherein Topolino laments his situation of being trapped in a bulky, outmoded large set, begging the children to remedy his situation. At this point, the television camera pulls back, revealing Topolino to be in a television-within-a-television, much as Nichetti made a film-within-a-film to make his critical points through the sort of Brechtian distancing that calls attention to the medium itself. Topolino then breaks out of the confines of the internal (tele)visual world and walks into the smaller screen where he can feel cozier and at ease. Although his momentary dilemma seems resolved, his world extends from the television-within-a-television, beyond the television itself, and outwardly to the children, as the daughter Antonella cries out at the plight of Topolino within their own outdated set. Indeed, the children's very identities seem (tele)visually determined. Antonella speaks almost solely in advertising slogans and Ricky can only play games in the guise of various characters he has seen on television.

Like *Il pollo ruspante*, *Tutto a posto*, *niente in ordine* knowingly plays with the television as supreme icon of capitalist consumer culture. One of the immigrant characters, Adelina from Sicily, immediately purchases a second-hand television once she is settled in Milan, and asks, "Isn't it beautiful?" She tells her boyfriend Carletto, an orphan from the northern Italian countryside, "Look around and on television you will see lots of things you need that you didn't know you needed." Throughout the film Adelina plays a game of sexual blackmail with Carletto, refusing to kiss him until he makes a commitment. In hopes of consummating their relationship, he offers to marry her, but she declares that marriage is "not economical." Frustrated, he tells her that she has become a modern girl "in all but one thing," namely, her stubborn devotion to the Sicilian honor code regarding virginity as a badge of virtue. The southern immigrant character Sante tells Carletto that he must trump her defense of virginity with force, for, according to the same code, she cannot give up her virginity willingly but must be taken. Adelina has by now bought a new television, which becomes her most precious and prized possession. When Carletto finally makes his move on Adelina, he accidentally knocks the television off its stand so that it is on the verge of falling and breaking. This incident places Adelina in the predicament of either guarding her virginity and Sicilian honor by fighting off Carletto, or else propping up her television with her arm and hand to prevent it from falling and breaking. A cut to a shared

intimate close-up of her and Carletto in post-coital bliss reveals her choice. Her modern consumerism may have successfully consumed her archaic Sicilian identity, but the simultaneous rescue of her television set and the sacrifice of her virginity ultimately serve the imperatives of a commodity culture that insists upon enjoyment.

Marcuse has something to say about this situation when he notes that “pleasure is societal,” at least where capitalism is concerned, and so it has to do with one’s place in relation to one’s social surroundings (*Eros* 227). Accordingly, Sante argues that poverty in the south was more tolerable than in the north, as others were also poor and all were woven into the fabric of the same community, whereas in Milan a person suffers from continually seeing the relative wealth of others and the things other people have. In their outlooks, both Adelina and Sante echo economist Fred Hirsch’s concept of the positional good, first articulated in 1976, that the value or worth of a product is determined in part, if not exclusively, by its desirability to others. This being the case, commodities can become increasingly frivolous and perpetually less tied to necessity. Marx again presciently noted that “the transformation of what was previously superfluous into what is necessary, as historically created necessity — is the general tendency of capital” (*Grundrisse* 527). In its relentless pursuit of economic growth and expansion as an end in itself, capitalism creates what Pasolini termed “false needs”:

I bisogni indotti dal vecchio capitalismo erano in fondo molto simili ai bisogni primari. I bisogni invece che il nuovo capitalismo può indurre sono totalmente e perfettamente inutili e artificiali. [...] Va aggiunto che il Consumismo può creare dei rapporti sociali immutabili sia creando, nel caso peggiore, un nuovo tecno-fascismo, sia, com’è ormai più probabile, creando come contesto alla propria ideologia edonistica [...] la falsa realizzazione [...] dei diritti civili.

(Pasolini, cited in Adornato 123)

Here Debord, echoing Pasolini, remarks: “When economic necessity is replaced by the need for boundless economic development, the satisfaction for primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy” (*Society* 29). Among the masses, consumer culture creates the illusion of citizenship and of being enfranchised by virtue of these masses being owners of commodities, even though they are less owners of their own society than ever before. Marx and Engels again presaged the situation by asserting that “in imagination, individuals seem freer under the dominance of the bourgeoisie than before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are to a greater extent governed by material forces” (*German Ideology* 87). Becoming consumers merely doubles the enslavement of the workers to the forces of capital, despite

Gramsci's hope of the contrary.

Of Chandeliers, Coats, Cars, and Pseudo-Needs: Ladri di saponette, Il pollo ruspante, and Beyond

Both *Ladri di saponette* and *Il pollo ruspante* examine how natural human desire becomes rerouted to the possession of such "pseudo-needs." Already outfitted with electricity, Maria in *Ladri di saponette* nevertheless fantasizes about the luxury of owning a chandelier; thus, her evocative description serves later as a commercial-like voice-over to the heavily edited advertising shots, taken from a variety of angles, of chandeliers which magically revolve and catch the light of Antonio's eyes in the factory on his first day at work. The chandelier is fetishized, practically eroticized. Antonio's announcement that his job will be in this glass factory even elicits an explicitly libidinal response from Maria, as they nearly roll off the bed in her sexual excitement, highlighting Jean François Lyotard's belief that "*desire underlies capitalism too*, so that in some sense the former gives the right to the latter [...]" (106; *emph. in original*). Sexuality and commodity-desire dovetail, reinforce, and pollute one another. In *Il pollo ruspante*, Dr. Pizzorno interprets this phenomenon according to the Lacanian dynamic of lack and desire, the sense of the former prompting the latter. Pizzorno declares the need "to provoke a state of systematic discontent in the consumer" that the commodity may presumably hope to resolve. Pizzorno even reduces the person to "a mixture of impulses and unconscious motivations to divert towards the ends of consumption." Although they originally only want to eat, Gregoretti's representative family is compelled by the Autogrill to pass through its gift shop before reaching the restaurant area in order to provoke their consumerist desires, associating the literal consumption of food with the capitalist consumption of commodities. The children grab at toys, and the father picks up a pair of gloves, encouraging his wife to get "something," presumably unneeded, merely to engage in the simple process of acquisition in accord with her consumerist identity. Debord claims that consumer culture perpetuates a "permanent opium war" of commodity addiction (27).

Il pollo ruspante and *Ladri di saponette* also underscore how consumer culture shamelessly manipulates and perverts a natural desire to consume by emphasizing the role of children, toddlers, and infants as part of the process. In *Il pollo ruspante* both Ricky and Antonella respond to television commercials with a predictable "gimme gimme" attitude, and the infant Paolo in *Ladri di saponette* continually attempts to ingest any object he can grasp in his hands: spaghetti, gas tubes, even large knives. The desire to eat chocolate, rather than cabbage, similarly prompts Bruno's defection from the misery of Nichetti's film-within-a-film to the world of commercials. The impulse to incorporate through consumption, with the mouth as first site of desire, thus justifiably appears as a very elemental part of human nature. Nevertheless, commodities, as repositories of desire, invariably function as the Lacanian *petit objet à*, by

definition unattainable. Such commodities simply cannot and do not exist, much like the qualities ascribed to them, in particular in regard to their presumed ability truly to satisfy the desires of the consumer. As McGowan notes, this *petit objet à*, this perfect commodity “that holds out the promise of the ultimate jouissance [...], constantly eludes us and haunts us with its absence,” especially in a consumerist society wherein enjoyment has become the main social duty (77-78). Immediate gratification does not provide enduring satisfaction. The acquisition of commodities merely prompts a process of disillusionment, thus provoking “a state of systematic discontent in the consumer” in an endless loop. McGowan concurs with Dr. Pizzorno, “The only end of desire is more desire [...]. In fact, desire is sustained dissatisfaction” (16).

Lattuada described his film *Il cappotto*, adapted from a 1843 novel by Nikolai Gogol, as the story of “a man who managed to buy his dignity with the purchase of a new coat” (Mereghetti, “Il cappotto” 3). The overcoat serves the main character Carmine De Carmine in very much the same way as the bicycle serves Antonio in *Ladri di biciclette*. As protection from the elements, the overcoat appears to be a necessity, and Lattuada establishes this idea in the opening frames of the film. Making his way through the wintry city of Pavia in his threadbare, torn, and patched overcoat, Carmine pulls up his collar and sneezes in response to the bitter weather even before he is heard talking. He takes his hands out of his ineffective pockets to warm them at a horse’s nostrils. Entering his workplace, he carefully performs the ritual of cleaning off a hook before hanging his shabby coat on the coat rack. A co-worker quickly displaces it, hanging it on another hook, and ripping a hole in it in the process. Carmine’s work provides him no respite from the cold, as he must accompany the mayor to an outdoor site where an ancient marble cipolin has been discovered. While the mayor and the others take refuge from the chill winter wind in the archaeologist’s trench, Carmine remains above, exposed to the elements, barely able to keep his papers from blowing away, to transcribe their conversation. The film reveals a readily recognizable hierarchy of overcoats in which Carmine’s, the poorest and most pathetic, rests at the bottom, while that of the mayor, with its substantially thick fabric and fur collar, stands at the top.

Once home, Carmine attempts to mend the new tear, but accidentally increases its size, distracted as he is by Caterina, who lives in the luxury apartment across from his modest rented room. A classic Italian diva role, played by the voluptuous Yvonne Sanson, Caterina first appears in close-up reclining in her boudoir. Her romantic liaison is with the opposite end of the sartorial spectrum, the mayor, and not Carmine. Carmine then puts his coat back on, attempting to brush it off and make it look its best as he regards himself in his wardrobe mirror before making his way back out into the streets of shoppers. There he and Caterina make close physical contact for the first time as they cross paths. Attired in a suitably glamorous leopard coat to walk her dog, who dons a newer and more expensive coat than Carmine’s, she mistakes him for a

beggar, and offers him some change. During this scene, a radio broadcast, presumably from an open shop door, first transmits a love song, confirming Caterina as Carmine's object of sexual desire. It is followed by a Lanetti coat manufacturer's commercial, which only accentuates Carmine's lack of a decent outer garment, at least where Caterina is concerned. This lack motivates him to visit a tailor whose exhortation, "You need a new coat," prompts the first extreme close-up of Carmine in the film, tying the idea of an elegant coat to his ego and self-image. The tailor further asserts, "Women love a good coat," thus utilizing the psychological association between sexual desire and the commodity that promises its realization in order to gain his business. When the municipal secretary mistakes Carmine's guileless recounting of a conversation he has overheard between two real estate developers for a blackmail attempt, Carmine suddenly ends up with the money to have a new coat made, which he insists must have a fur collar to rival the mayor's. The film then indulges in the consumerist rituals of choosing a pattern, buying fabric, taking measurements, and of Carmine finally admiring himself in the multiple mirrors of the tailor's shop while wearing the finished product. In this regard one could consider McGowan's application of Debord's concept of commodity culture as one of spectacle focusing more specifically on the psychodynamics of the consumer's narcissism. He comments, "Turning desire narcissistically toward the image [...] allows respite from the subject's own lack" (69). In a Lacanian manner, then, Carmine finds wholeness in his mirrored image, even though he is not whole. Nevertheless, to celebrate and affirm his belief in the compensatory capacity of his acquired commodity, he has his photograph taken as he wears his new coat, which he then sends to Caterina, prompting critic Edoardo Bruno to comment on "the 'marvel' of the overcoat, which is its ability to transform a man and give meaning to his life" (15).

As with Antonio and the bicycle in *Ladri di biciclette*, the coat represents faith in oneself, pride, self-worth. Carmine then fetishizes the new coat much as Lattuada fetishized its making. He takes refuge under a stranger's umbrella, below awnings, and beneath the wagon of a street vendor, all in an effort to avoid getting his coat wet as he makes his way to the secretary's party where he proudly participates in the social ritual of checking his coat. After a few drinks, he makes a semi-drunken toast wherein he tells the crowd, "I came to this party to christen my coat." When a plea he makes for the disenfranchised receives a dismissive and derisive response, he starts to leave, but finds his coat lying disrespected on the floor. He then changes his mind about his departure, and, instead, equipped with and encouraged by the status symbol of the coat he is now wearing, asks Caterina to dance with him. Exaggerated high and low angle shots serve to emphasize her physical inappropriateness for him, as she seemingly towers over him, and his ecstatic dance only gains him the ridicule of the other party guests. As in *Ladri di biciclette*, this taste of elation proves short-lived because, like Antonio with his bicycle, Carmine has his coat stolen by

someone who is worse off than he is.

The coat as commodity of desire functions similarly in *Il posto*, where its metaphorical importance, as Millicent Marcus notes, is “a way of moving up the social scale, a way of wearing fancy new trench coats instead of short jackets and berets” (214). The trench coat thus distinguishes the white-collar Domenico from his blue-collar, jacket-wearing father. Arguably, the trench coat seems an unnecessary commodity, as Domenico already owns an overcoat, albeit one that is not waterproof for the damp Lombard climate in which he lives. Moreover, as with Carmine’s overcoat and Caterina, the urgent lure of the trench coat for Domenico derives in large part from its association with his sexual desire for the female character Antonietta. Domenico first sees Antonietta in the waiting room, and again in the exam room, but only during lunch in the cafeteria does he truly and fully gaze upon her, attempting to engage her in conversation at the cashier’s station. However, he fails to make any real connection until he later joins her as she window-shops. Olmi confirms their nascent bond by following the couple in a series of two shots throughout the city of Milan. Antonietta stops to gaze at a man’s trench coat, shown from a low angle shot much as Caterina was seen from Carmine’s point of view in *Il cappotto*, to enhance the feeling of overwhelming desirability and seeming unattainability. Antonietta states that she likes it with lots of buttons and belts and because it is sporty. Olmi continues shooting the couple through the windows of the various shops and showrooms, that, as yet, exclude them. While looking at an automobile showroom, Olmi creates a hierarchy of vehicles, as Domenico explains his wish to purchase a motorcycle, if he gets the job. While not a car, it would nevertheless constitute a step up from his father’s moped. Olmi then shoots the two young people through the window of a bar, detailing their indulgence in a commodity they can afford: a cup of coffee. This modest purchase results in Domenico being called “sir” by the bartender behind the counter, a class designation that does not go unnoticed by Antonietta. Nevertheless, perhaps for fear of being charged extra for sitting, Domenico remains standing as they drink. When Domenico later shops for a trench coat with his mother, Olmi keeps the more expensive coat Antonietta had praised in the foreground as a visual magnet to which Domenico’s gaze insistently returns. The first mirror shot in the film occurs as Domenico tries on a series of trench coats that clearly do not suit him for their excessive size or other stylistic reasons. With the mirror shot, Olmi establishes the link between the questionably unnecessary commodity and the human ego. However, he most ingeniously deploys a mirror shot when Domenico later tries on his trench coat in the company’s men’s room, assessing its appropriateness alternatively with his personal and work cap. Only as Domenico walks toward the mirror does Olmi reveal that it is Domenico’s mirror image, rather than his actual self, that has been shown. This modest but clever sequence suggests that the human ego and the actual self have become contiguous, interchangeable, and mutually indistinguishable for a commodity-driven culture and consumerist society.

Domenico hopes for opportunities to be seen by Antonietta as he wears the coat, asking his brother if it is clear or cloudy in the morning, so that he might have an excuse to wear the coat to work. When he finally sees her while he wears it, she does not notice him as she exits the cafeteria with her departmental co-workers and remains hidden beneath one of their umbrellas. Marcus observes:

But by assigning Antonietta to a department remote from Domenico's and even worse, by failing to synchronize their schedules, the same invisible bureaucratic intelligence that ordained the couple's meeting presents obstacles to those daily encounters that so nourish the course of affection. Domenico eats one hour before Antonietta, and exits the plants fifteen minutes after she does so that no sooner is the romantic plot set in motion by the *deus ex machina* of bureaucracy than it is blocked by the same seemingly superhuman force.

(218)

Finally, Domenico's mail delivery to her department results in a chance encounter in the hallway, during which she tells him that she might be attending the company's New Year's party. Determined to go and wear his trench coat, he attends the party, but she, disappointingly, does not. Once again the commodity of desire fails to deliver the values associated with it.

A similar issue pertains to the hierarchy of vehicles observed by Domenico and Antonietta in Olmi's film, as it informs a number of other films from the period. In *Delitto d'amore*, Nullo's motorcycle and Pasquale's moped immediately identify their relative class status within society. In *Tutto a posto, niente in ordine*, Biki extorts money from a man who has sexually forced himself on her in order to buy a Topolino, basically commodifying herself as a prostitute in order to purchase the car. In *Il pollo ruspante*, jockeying for position on the motorway as cars pass one another and cut one another off merely correlates to a jockeying for class status among the owners of the various automobiles. The married couple vent their anger at the owner of their dream car, a Fiat 1800, who fails to drive it in a manner they deem appropriate. The endless competition for status publicly revealed through ownership of automobiles eventually causes a blinding car accident that abruptly ends the portion of Gregoretti's film that deals with the representative family.

The automobile as commodity of desire leads to similarly disastrous consequences in *L'automobile*. The film shows that, with taxis and buses at her disposal, Anna does not actually require a car for transport. However, the sheer proliferation of automobiles, presented through numerous panning shots sutured to Anna's gaze as she makes her way through Rome as a pedestrian in a world of cars, causes her to think, "I seem to be the only one not to have one." Anna's sentiment echoes McGowan's analysis of the dynamics of desire in consumerism when he comments, "I feel as if everyone else has access to a

secret enjoyment that I lack” (68).⁶ When Anna is hustled out of two taxis in a row, she begins to think that she not only wants a car, but she needs one. She pictures her dream car as a yellow Fiat 850 Spider convertible. When she sees it in a showroom, the appreciative gaze of a couple who stands beside her confirms it as the car of her choice. The film then presents a series of social rituals that serve to fetishize the commodity, much as Lattuada had done with the tailor and the overcoat in his eponymous film. These rituals include going to a gas station, taking driving lessons and the driver’s license exam, posing for her license photo, purchasing the insurance, and having the salesman usher her from the car lot into traffic. Aware of her shortcomings as a driver, she nevertheless asserts that God will help her with the exam in a near fusion of Benedictine *laborare est orare*, her religious belief, and commodity culture. Accordingly, in her first solo drive she heads directly towards the dome of St. Peter’s.

The point of a convertible, of course, is not only to see, but to be seen en route. Anna states, “In a car I feel beautiful.” The commodity thus promises an accompanying value, a lifestyle choice. Her friend Gigetto completely misses this point when he futilely attempts to sell her his own decrepit and aesthetically unpleasing vehicle. McGowan elaborates on the principle of the vehicle as a positional good: “One purchases a luxury car not simply to enjoy the luxury it provides but to be recognized as one who can afford such luxury” (25). The FIAT 850 convertible initially seems to live up to its promises, as Giannetti carefully includes numerous moving and subjective shots of impressed acquaintances greeting Anna when she drives through the city. Instead of interacting with these people, Anna can only greet them from afar. Debord noted that “the commodity [...] comes really to *occupy* social life” inasmuch as it displaces any close interpersonal communication (25). Anna’s various automobile rituals culminate in the Sunday morning washing of her car, performed at a park fountain, with the attentiveness of a lover. In fact, Giannetti presents the washing ritual with the aural and cinematic syntax of a love scene, with romantic music, and in soft focus. With a photo of herself mounted on the dashboard, the commodity owns the owner. Anna concedes, “They say that modern man is a slave to his car.” From this apex of mutual ownership, instead of spontaneous travel to Florence, Anna discovers that an ostensibly much simpler jaunt to the nearby beach in Ostia proves to be both a headache and an ordeal. The freedom of having an automobile degenerates into the entrapment of bumper-to-bumper traffic. Once at the beach, parking the car turns out to be

⁶ Carlyle reported on the escalation of Italy into automobile culture, noting in 1965 that “the number of cars used in Italy today is [...] increasing rapidly” (102). Earle confirms this comment with statistics, noting that “automobile manufacture was 38,000 in 1938, and 1.5 million in 1967” (112). The demand for automobiles, led by Fiat with its 90% monopoly of domestic car sales, resulted in a staggering 60% of Turin’s labor force being involved in factory work (Sassoon 39; Wright 80).

equally troublesome, and she must warily entrust her vehicle to a parking attendant. Having arrived at her chosen bathing establishment, her car finally seems to deliver most fully on its lifestyle promise, as she soon espies a diver named Lou above a pool, lowering her sunglasses to emphasize the commodification of his athletic body as the object of her desiring gaze. His friend Guido accompanies him in order to take photographs of him, an affirmation of Lou's intentional commodification of his own body. Finding the two men without transport, Anna offers them a ride, only to have Lou assert his proprietary nature over her automobile and take the wheel. Despite her protests, he exploits the car as a source of quick and easy gratification, speeding, passing numerous cars in his relentless effort to "get ahead," and needlessly revving the engine as an aural display of power. The heavy editing involved in this sequence brings Giannetti's film to a suspenseful kinetic climax that culminates in Lou's crossing the divided highway and wrecking Anna's car. Lou is taken away in a stretcher, leaving a crowd to congregate around Anna, blaming her for blocking the flow of traffic, and eventually tipping her destroyed vehicle upside down in order to get it out of the way. Ultimately, the commodity does not provide the accompanying values associated with it, as a dejected and disillusioned Anna finally realizes. She sits atop the remains of her ruined car, and chants, "Everyone here has gone mad, mad, mad," as one automobile after another races past her.

The Commodification of Housing Needs

If chandeliers, coats, and cars exemplify the excesses of commodity capitalism, capitalism commodifies the human necessity of shelter from the elements, transforming it into domestic real estate. In the arc from the immediate post-war period to the *sorpasso* of the mid 1980s, a number of films address the issue of housing, whose shortage became especially acute in Italy during the *dopoguerra*, since much of the country had functioned as a battleground for the last years of World War II. Throughout Europe, 40% of the previously available housing had either been destroyed or rendered unlivable by the war, and Italy was no exception. Carlyle, writing around mid-century, noted that "the housing problem is one of the most serious problems in postwar Italy" in a 1952 study showing that almost 3 million families were living in overcrowded conditions, which were not alleviated by the numerous *pensioni* catering to single individuals such as those seen in *Il cappotto* and De Sica's 1952 film *Umberto D.* (25). In the opening scene of *Ladri di biciclette*, we find Antonio living in an apartment without water, as we see his wife Maria fetching it at an outside pump. Still, his housing appears superior to that of the miserable thief Alfredo, who lives with his sister and mother in a one-room apartment that serves as kitchen and bedroom for all three. De Sica's film again proves representative, as Carlyle reports that almost a million people at the time were living four to a room (26). The shantytown of De Sica's *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) thus

constituted a symptom of a very real social problem, and his film *Il tetto* (1956) presents the roof of the film's title very much as the obscure commodity of desire for a young married couple in need of housing. Carlyle observes that part of the problem derived from the fact that "the idea of national responsibility for workers' housing and the need for government control over building were almost unheard of" (25). By 1952, however, the government began to tackle this problem with a seven-year housing plan, so that in the following decade 40% of housing investment was state-funded and construction employment grew by 84% (Sassoon 30). Such government-sponsored housing projects too often became prey to the parasitism of unscrupulous "corruption between local authorities and real estate entrepreneurs," as both *Il cappotto* and Francesco Rosi's *Le mani sulla città* (1963) reveal (Sassoon 35).

In *Tutto a posto, niente in ordine* the group of immigrant workers in Milan who agree to live together do so for reasons of affordability and in order to share expenses. However, their sense of communal space runs contrary to capitalism and to the proprietary commodification of living quarters that most often insists that housing provide not only shelter, but also privacy. Domenico in *Il posto* sleeps in the kitchen because the family home does not allow him a room of his own. In *Renzo and Luciana* the young couple lives in a room in her parents' apartment for similar reasons, the glass door that separates their room from the kitchen providing insufficient seclusion to permit them any sense of intimacy. Instead, capitalism invades their space through the sounds of her parents' television set. Furthermore, commodity culture has already encroached upon their extremely finite space through their accumulation of furniture and appliances stacked in boxes that surround and overwhelm their bed, all acquired in anticipation of the home they cannot yet afford. In addition, capitalism glares into their room from the balcony, in the form of a neon-lit advertisement for a department store. Luciana explains to Renzo that they allow the glare of this intrusion since it provides them with a discount at the store. Ironically, when they achieve the commodity of their own apartment, this locale still allows them neither shared privacy nor intimacy, as they must work different shifts in order to afford it, and see one another only in passing. Thus, while they manage to purchase the commodity they pursued, it once again predictably fails to supply the value that it promised. Monicelli begins the film with an image of a huge time clock as a marker for the change of work shift, a sign which figures in *Ladri di saponette* and *Delitto d'amore* as well. Debord notes, "Pseudo-cyclical time is a time that has been *transformed by industry*. The time based on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity, one that recombines everything that the disintegration of the old unitary societies had differentiated into private life, economic life, and political life" (88; *emph. in original*). This "pseudo-cyclical time," together with its association with the commodity culture, has kept and will continue to keep Renzo and Luciana apart, as he goes off to bed while she goes off to work by the end of Monicelli's film.

Writing of Italy in the 1960s, Carlyle claims, "Housing conditions are appalling," and Carmela's living situation in *Delitto d'amore* illustrates this situation (14). She lives with three male siblings, including her adult brother, and her mother, in a one-room apartment with used furniture and newspaper insulation on the walls, one of them sleeping on a rollaway bed. They line up their bureaus in an attempt to divide the room in two and achieve a modicum of privacy. They must retrieve water from the fountain below; in fact, residents of the apartment building even share a row of outhouses, further compromising privacy. In contrast, Nullo's home, replete with modern appliances and conveniences, contains multiple rooms, including individual bedrooms for him and his siblings. To him, the indistinguishable cookie-cutter apartment complex in which he resides serves as a symptom of what is dehumanizing in contemporary commodity culture, but Carmela can only exclaim, "You're all rich here," when she sees it.

By the 1980s, despite the aspirations of middle-class Italians to own the ubiquitous *seconda casa* for their vacations or as a weekend getaway, the issue of an affordable *prima casa* remained a dilemma for many workers, whose lower wage earnings proved meager compared to exorbitantly rising real estate costs. Maselli's *Storia d'amore* in part explores this dilemma, as three young people with menial jobs set up housekeeping in an abandoned and condemned building. Maselli declared that his desire to make the film stemmed from the fact that "Italian cinema has ended up by keeping off screen those millions and millions of Italians who live arduously working day after day without drugging themselves, prostituting themselves, or robbing others" (Parigi 85). The "pseudo-cyclical time" of Bruna's work schedule defines the rhythm of her life, as the camera provides repeated close-ups of her alarm going off at 3:30am. Living in the periphery and commuting to the city center, she is the regular first passenger on her first bus, just one of the eight she takes on a daily basis merely to reach her job as a cleaning woman in an office building in the center of town. Maselli presents a montage of her tedious tasks — mopping, cleaning, buffing, dusting, polishing — culminating where they began, with her middle-of-the-night alarm clock. This cyclical routine emphasizes the unending drudgery of her existence. While waiting for a bus, she meets Sergio, who also works at a menial job as a porter at the general market. Ironically, although Bruna works for a housing development agency, she cannot afford a home of her own and must live in a crowded apartment with her father and two brothers. Adding bitter irony, the company for which she works has also demolished the building where Sergio once lived. The two then meet Mario, a southern immigrant, who also works in a menial position, as a *barista* in a nearby milk shop which, to Bruna's delight, opens at 4am, thus making it possible for her to take her first coffee in a social setting and before boarding her first commuter bus. The one modest luxury Bruna permits herself is coffee spiked with a sweet liqueur, called *mistrà*. The three move together into an unoccupied condemned building. Technically

squatters, they exert themselves to make the abandoned building look and feel very much like a domestic space. Sergio and Mario bond over a book on electronics, as Sergio shares with him his dream of becoming an electrician. As Bruna has neither aptitude nor interest in the field, she instead goes about cleaning the apartment as they talk. She quietly realizes that she will be perpetually trapped in her menial position, incapable of advancement or upward social mobility, and ill-prepared to participate in a consumerist society, while perceiving its every lure beyond her grasp. In a tour de force of cinematic understatement shown in real time, Bruna lies on the roof ledge of her building for two-and-a-half minutes before rolling over to her death.

Bruna's father stated, "A stable job is a real job." The Italian economy in its Fordist phase from the 1950s to the 1980s generally offered such employment stability, but, even so, none of these films that address working-class life results in a happily-ever-after ending, even when the couple is in love, as are Renzo and Luciana. Instead, from the death of the postmodern subject in *Ladri di saponette* to the death of the *sorpasso*-era worker in *Storia d'amore*, most of the characters realize that the lure of the commodity serves only as a distraction that ultimately fails to compensate for the exploitation they undergo at the workplace. As Bruna says, "We must earn a living since we are born." The ownership of a car, a home, a television set, a coat, a chandelier, or even just a coffee with *mistrà* brings disillusionment rather than the enjoyment prescribed by McGowan. The failure that the consumer experiences in enjoying the fruits of work compounds and exacerbates the drudgery of capitalist work, and for many characters in the films I have examined this combination becomes untenable. As a result, the overlap of Fordism and consumerism proffers not a materialist panacea, but rather an economic double bind from which the working-class characters cannot escape.

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