

MOVING STILL: PORTRAITURE AND SUPERFICIAL TIES IN TWO VISCONTI FILMS

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Resumen:

Este ensayo se centra en dos películas dirigidas por Luchino Visconti, *La terra trema* (1948) y *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960) estudiadas bajo la lente de discursos sobre la Cuestión Meridional (la subyugación del sur por el norte propia del proceso de consolidación nacional italiana). Analizo dos cuestiones concomitantes: la configuración de lazos de parentesco y cuerpos sociales meridionales mediante retratos fotográficos; y la relación de éstos últimos con imágenes en movimiento y narrativa fílmica. Consecuentemente en mi análisis estilístico pongo en duda afirmaciones de realismo documental en ambas películas consideradas paradigmas del cine neorrealista, resaltando en ellas el uso sistemático de convenciones melodramáticas. Subrayo el carácter sinestésico del melodrama, que toca al espectador mientras éste mira la pantalla. Visconti sistemáticamente presenta relaciones sinestésicas y emocionales entre tomas, fotos e imágenes para transmitir su propia solución a la Cuestión Meridional.

Abstract:

This essay focuses on two films directed by Luchino Visconti, *La terra trema* (1948) and *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960) under the light of Southern Question discourses—the subjugation of the South to the North inscribed in the process leading to Italian national affirmation. I address two related issues: the fabrication of southern kinship and social bodies via portraiture, and the latter's relationship to moving images and filmic narrative. Consequently, analyzing film style I question claims of documentary realism in these films, paradigms of neorealist filmmaking, by foregrounding their systematic use of melodramatic conventions. I stress the synesthetic side to melodrama. Spectators look at the screen while in their turn are touched by its moving images. Visconti systematically presents once and again this synesthetic emotional relationship between shots, photographs, and pictures to forward his solution to the Southern Question.

Palabras clave:

Neorrealismo; Melodrama; Luchino Visconti; La cuestión meridional; Estudios italianos.

Keywords:

Neorealism; Melodrama; Luchino Visconti; Southern Question; Italian Studies.

1. Introducción

La questione meridionale, as coined by Antonio Gramsci in his eponymous essay, addresses the subjugation of the South to the North inscribed in processes leading to Italian national affirmation. Recent scholarship defines the “Southern Question” as a two-centuries-long discursive construction. It depicts the provinces South of Rome as different from the rest of the peninsula: ethnocentric literary, anthropological, and historical perspectives (to name a few) built an image of the South as backward, pauperized, and morally challenged compared to its northern counterpart. Persistent stereotypes informed southerners as well. Passionate, undisciplined, and incapable of group solidarity; southerners were portrayed as the Other *within*, under the guise of positivistic analysis and later on anthropological research performed by northern *intelligentsia* and southern elites.¹ This paper contributes to the debate analyzing Neorealist films as products of such a discursive matrix. Shooting on location, many take place in southern provinces. Some even describe northbound cartographies from topsy-turvy South to comparatively cohesive North, such as Rossellini’s *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) or Pietro Germi’s *Il cammino della speranza* (*Path of Hope*, 1950). I will focus on two films directed by Luchino Visconti, *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948) and *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and his Brothers*, 1960), which take place in the South and North of Italy, respectively. Visconti used these films as platforms to impart cinematically his own solution to the southern question with Gramscian undertones.

I address the issue of fabricated southern kinship via *moving stills*. I question the role of portraiture in building cinematic kinship narratives about southerners and what is at stake when portraiture is used to legitimize affective and familial ties in these films. I argue that the family portrait in moving images addresses an ethical imperative when it comes to

¹ See for instance Moe, Nelson (2002). *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*. Berkeley: University of California Press. As well as Schneider, Jane (1998). *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*. Oxford: Berg.

documenting and narrativizing social bodies and individuals in particular societies. The paradoxical relationship between present image and preterit time embedded in diegetic portraits does not only relate film, family, history, and photography together. It also implies an observer accountable for combining the pieces. Editing and composing the frame, such an observer inscribes the visual into temporality via specific narrative modes. With respect to film style, I will contest claims of documentary realism made in (as well as made for) these Visconti films.

Both films ambivalently conceive the Italian North/South divide as they construct an elusive narrating I (eye) reminiscent of early ethnographical discourse: “a synthetic cultural description based on participant observation [which validated] the persona of the fieldworker [...] both publicly and professionally” (Clifford, 1988, p. 29). According to James Clifford, early ethnography offered a “predominantly synechdochic [sic] rhetorical stance [in which] parts were assumed to be microcosmos or analogies of wholes” (p. 31). By analyzing specific episodes in both films, I contend that a systematic use of synecdoche shapes and informs characters and territories within a melodramatic narrative framework. Compartmentalization of space, individual pathos, and inhabiting a world of polarities—all basic melodramatic tenets—become a platform for deploying diverse political agendas about the South under the gaze of the narrating I.

2. *La terra trema*: the South on view

“His fishermen are fishermen in real life” (Bazin, 2005, p. 41) praisefully wrote André Bazin regarding the cast in Visconti’s second film. In his 1948 review for *Esprit* the French film critic stated that the novelty, as well as the “triumph” of *La terra trema* was the ability to integrate the aesthetic realism of *Citizen Kane* (1941) and the documentary realism of Rouquier’s *Farrebique* (1946). The paradoxical synthesis of “realism” and “aestheticism” according to Bazin produced a “Communist film” characterized by “its quasidocumentary realism [...] the exoticism intrinsic to the subject matter;

and, too, the underlying ‘human geography’” (Bazin, 2005: 41). These three categories are fraught with questions regarding processes of knowledge-gathering vis-à-vis places and peoples unfamiliar to the spectator. Bazin’s approach to *La terra trema*, both film and its production conditions, obfuscates the interpretative distance between director and filmed subject. A close analysis of the film, however, uncovers under its documentary realism a synecdochic rhetorical stance, proper of the ethnography of the 1920’s (Clifford, 1988), at the service of a personal political agenda.

La terra trema tells the story of enthusiastic ‘Ntoni Valastro and his family who set up a small business of salted fish in order to free themselves from exploitation by the Accitrezza (a small Sicilian town) wholesalers. They undergo many economic sacrifices such as mortgaging their house in order to buy a boat, barrels, and salt, as well as guarantee transportation of their product to the city. Concomitant with their neighbors’ skepticism, their boat is wrecked on the gulf amid the ravages of a terrible storm. The Valastros’ life collapses. ‘Ntoni falls into alcoholism; his brother Cola abandons the household in search for a better life, probably in smuggling. The family loses its home by breaking the traditional ways of Accitrezza economics. Finally, and to make matters worse, the Valastros lose their honor when Marshal Don Salvatore seduces young Lucia. By the end of the film ‘Ntoni Valastro, humiliated and in rags, is forced to go back to the wholesalers’ fishing and transportation cooperative in order to beg for work for himself. *La terra trema* tells a drama of defeat. Of the price a single family pays when its awareness of exploitation and will to action do not match the collective abulia of their fellow townspeople.

Even though the plot focuses on one family’s demise, visually *La terra trema* takes the Valastros and the Accitrezza as analogies for a grander tale of human exploitation. A visual rhythm of considerably long takes lasting several minutes, extreme long shots, and panning shots where simultaneous actions take place, engulf the Accitrezza in an atemporal locus of sorts. The

paradoxical synthesis between realism and the picturesque² produces a stunning effect of freezing in time a pathetic collective experience. Likewise, the synthesis places the spectator at an intimate proximity to the events. The rigorously fixed camera in the film sets everything in the frame within a visual field analogous to the human eye (Thomas, 2008, p. 22). Furthermore, the film elaborates a systematic artifice of real time. Presenting to the spectator entire operations such as folding and lighting a cigarette instead of condensing the action via montage. The camera rarely moves in *La terra trema*, positioning spectators as observers enclosed by and yet distanced from the diegetic world of Acitrezza.

According to Bazin, the plasticity of the images in *La terra trema* avoids any inclination to the epic. Visconti's intent however could not be farther from this claim. The Valastros' plight is framed within a synecdochic displacement of meaning. The opening frames offer the semantic key of the film. Superimposed text reads: "The story which this film relates is the same age-old story found in all those countries where men exploit other men". The text flows from bottom to top of the frame covering, and hence obfuscating, an already indistinct shot of the town's chapel, which can only be recognized by the diegetic sound of church bells. Visually, just as a voice-over narrator does, the prologue intervenes upon the image rendering it palimpsestic. Text over image alters the latter's capability of presenting objects in favor of the former's representational imperatives. If we were to compare cinematographic image with an utterance, an image of a church conveys: 'there is a church'. Conversely, Visconti's moving image-text *represents* a church. Concomitantly represents an axis of this social milieu organized by religious and economic mores, vexed by oppressive agents of a rampant consuming society that lies beyond the Acitrezza's horizon of expectations. We must also ask ourselves what happens with our own expectations. Does the film present an objective image of the South, or is it an epistemic

² For a pictorial analysis of the picturesque in Italian nineteenth century illustrated papers see Nelson Moe's *The View from Vesuvius*. Moe considers the picturesque as a visually rendered mixture of backwardness denunciations and quaint representation of southern landscapes and communities. In Visconti's oeuvre, also see *Il Gattopardo* (1963).

intervention whose focus—and epic overtones—is always already set to infinity?

Convolutions of formal qualities and circumstances of film production inform many readings of *La terra trema*. Of particular interest is film scholar Walter F. Korte's take on Visconti's methodological approach. According to Korte, Visconti's primary ambition was to carry "the neorealist investigation to its limit: to express the greatest amount of truth, to push documentation to its furthest point, to show the nature of things without any non-realist excrescences" (Korte, 1971, p. 5). Pushing neorealist investigation to the limit didn't merely consist in casting locals as actors for the film, using dialect instead of Italian, or establishing an ethical rapport with contemporary reality.³ Following the steps of Carlo Levi and Elio Vittorini, Visconti went to Sicily in 1947 with a small stipend from the Partito Comunista Italiano to shoot a short documentary. Visconti's fieldwork and film produced according to Korte "a metaphor of the human condition" working "'real' material in an ideological structure in order to create a form of archaic beauty" which also "reflected on contemporary events" such as the peasant massacre at Portella delle Ginestre and Mafia political conspiracies. In other words, "Acitrezza [...] became the locale where the remote past (feudal, immobile life) and the volatile future (the collective consciousness of the oppressed) could meet: so it was that 'the earth trembles'" (Korte, 1971, p. 6).

Korte's paean is symptomatic of an analysis that takes at face value the *truth* constructed in *La terra trema* via filmic *artifex*. Juxtaposing fieldwork and moving images, Korte fashions a fable of validation around the figure of Visconti the wayfarer as arbiter of Acitrezza reality. He is not alone. Bazin himself asserts: "beyond the merits of [*La terra trema's*] purely formal properties, the image reveals an intimate knowledge of the subject matter on the part of the filmmaker" (Bazin, 2005, p. 43). Unlike Bazin, however, Korte does recognize the epic character of the film, when it comes to its atemporality. Furthermore he bases his argument on Visconti's own account of his creative process, which is of interest to us here. Korte quotes the

³ See Cesare Zavattini's *après la lettre* Neorealist manifesto "Some ideas on the Cinema" (1953).

director in order to establish a link between the author and a literary realist tradition embodied in Giovanni Verga's work. According to Korte, it is the reading of *I Malavoglia* (1881) that provided Visconti's shift of interest to the South. In point of fact, the director, quoted in Korte's text, affirms:

To me, a Lombard reader, habituated through traditional custom to the clear rigor of Manzonian fantasy, the primitive and gigantic world of the Acitrezza fishermen and Marineo shepherds always appeared aroused in an imaginative and violent epic tone: to my Lombard eyes... Verga's Sicily truly appeared as Ulysses' island, an island of adventures and fervent passions, situated immobile and proud against the billows of the Ionian Sea. So I thought about a film on *I Malavoglia* (Korte, 1971, p. 6).

Truly an immobile island of adventures and fervent passions is the isolated world of Acitrezza. However, the ostracism is neither inherent nor imposed from within as Visconti suggests. Contained movements of the camera fix the field of vision of the town. They hold fishermen, women, and wholesalers in a unity of space bounded by mountains, sea and *faraglioni*. Any reader of *I Malavoglia* would note how Verga's Trezza is an open town. Connected by transportation technologies (train and steamboat) and illegal practices (brigandage) beyond its boundaries. Clearly Visconti's analogy between visual field and human eye surreptitiously traps characters and spectators in a far more ostracized world. Fixed camera shots with deep focus reign in Visconti's Acitrezza. Even in closed quarters, the camera lens set to infinity denies the spectator any possibility of distinguishing background from foreground. With no soft focus, which would allow hierarchical distinctions between elements within the frame, characters and things are equalized in terms of visual matter. Depth of focus cancels out spatial depth, just as any distinction between private and public spheres has no place in Visconti's monologic world. Nevertheless, in few occasions rigorous camera atrophy does give way to movement.

Two close-up sequences stand out. Only five minutes into the film the voice-over narrator has already divided gender roles. At home, the women wait for the men's return while they clean the household and prepare dinner for all.

Nubile Lucia dusts the few pieces of furniture as she walks from a fixed full shot of the room into a close-up of her face. While the shift takes place the omniscient narrator comments on how the women “[t]hink of [...] their brothers, and of their father too who on one such morning never returned from the sea” before Mara intervenes, asking Lucia: “What are you looking at?” In close up Lucia responds: “Our brothers. I always think of them out there, just like I thought of Father the day he didn’t return”. She continues enumerating her brothers as she points to a picture that hangs on the wall, outside of the frame. Cut to the picture itself, as Lucia’s voice in off says: “They’re all at see now”. The full shot of the picture zooms into an extreme close-up while Lucia exclaims: “The bitter sea!”

Intercutting plays an important role in this sequence. It not only establishes a shot/counter shot relationship between Lucia and the picture, putting into dialogue fictional character and image by means of cinematic *lingua franca*: eye-line match. It also acts as the guarantor of our understanding of family ties within the film, their social hierarchies, and their collective identity. As film scholar Giuliana Bruno duly notes of familial photography: “[it] is necessary to the claiming of a history, to the affirmation of an identity over time [...] photograph represents the trace of an origin and thus a personal identity, the proof of having existed and therefore of having the right to exist” (Bruno, 1987, p. 71). Lucia points with her finger to the photograph. She distinguishes ‘Ntoni with his sailor’s uniform, Cola and Vanni who wear their first long pants, she also mentions Alfio and Grandfather who carry no epithet in her description. Lucia with her index finger points to her family, while at the same time she arranges them in hierarchies of age, gender (she doesn’t mention the women posing in the portrait), and habitus. Lucia indexes the family in both senses of indicating, and recording, archiving the family.⁴ Her index—along with her words—performatively adds a particular meaning to a photograph that will appear again and again in the movie as a leitmotif for family ties gone awry. Her act is one of epistemic violence, which diegetically speaking seems unnecessary. Mara does not need to ask Lucia

⁴ I borrow the concept from Lisa Wedeen. See her 2008, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*. Chicago: The University of Chicago University Press.

what is she looking at when the only image in the wall is the family portrait. The narrativized image is more likely presented *to* the spectator motivating the family drama. The portrait catches the viewer's attention and drives the plot forward while reinforcing the monologic perspective of the film.

A second close-up takes place by the end of the film. After 'Ntoni stoically suffers social isolation, he goes back one last time to the shipwreck. A girl coincidentally jumps on the boat, rubs 'Ntoni's nose in that no one likes the Valastros any longer in town, and innocently says she would help him if she could. 'Ntoni's answer, in close-up, sums up the issues *La terra trema* condemns:

How could you help me? Those who can help me are envious of each other. They don't understand that what I did was for all their sakes, not just for mine alone. So now they've abandoned me. Some are after my flesh, some are after my bones [...] but one day they will see I was right and that the day that I lost it all will become a good day for everyone. We have to learn to take care for each other and unite for our common good. Only then can we go forward.

'Ntoni's conversation with the girl establishes again shot/counter shot cutting with extradiegetic purposes. When the shot cuts back from the girl to the sailor, camera angle shifts from $\frac{3}{4}$ view to straight-on extreme close up of 'Ntoni staring directly at the camera. His words gain strength as his plight pierces the fourth wall of Accitrezza and addresses the spectator directly.

Through his "real" fisherman, Visconti deploys his political agenda, which strongly adheres to Gramsci's solution to the Southern Question. Gramsci envisioned an alliance between southern peasants and northern blue-collar workers to effect a restructuring of (southern) society. If we are to assume that the spectatorship of the film at the time was mainly constituted by Lombard and cosmopolitan viewers like Visconti himself, it is quite likely that via 'Ntoni a message of change and denunciation is precisely what the film formulates. It is not a film *for* Sicilians. 'Ntoni's very words put into question *La terra trema* as a project pushing neorealist investigation to the limit. The synecdochic move that he himself provokes upon his corporeality

via enunciation makes 'Ntoni the martyr of a universal tale of exploitation. He becomes a means for direct spectatorship interpellation. The price Visconti makes his characters pay is the negation of their own individuality. 'Ntoni's resistance is vitiated from the start by a narrative extradiegetic agent who is the arbiter of the lives, kin, acts, and mores of the fishermen of Acitrezza. Such an intervention is further stressed by iterative extreme long shots that present collectives instead of identifiable individuals.

3. *Rocco e I Soui Fratelli: South in North*

Rocco e i suoi fratelli (1960), Visconti's 7th film, goes back to the Southern question with a twist. *Rocco* tells the story of the Parondis, desperate migrants who travel to Milan from an impoverished South looking to join the new labor forces that are rapidly transforming Italy from a rural agricultural society to an urban industrial one. Migration burdens familial cohesion among the Parondis. They are forced to negotiate between traditional collectivist values and an individualistic consumer society. The film is divided into five different chapters telling the story of five brothers and their personal vicissitudes in urban space. Even though the film offers the spectator a freer camera, narrative compartmentalization—by means of text, siblings' names, superimposed on moving images—is reminiscent of the immersed and yet detached narrating agent of *Acitrezza*. *Rocco*, like *La terra trema*, focuses on fleeting familial structures. Unlike the previous film, its take on the family is all but collectivistic. Rather, starting from its narrative structure, this film offers a reconsideration of the family as a unit constituted by individuals with different habitus and, hence, different degrees of social as well as familial recognition among its members. The intrinsic differential value fashioned among family members will ignite the kin melodrama.

Again, a female character figures in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* as the indexing agent of family relations. Unlike Lucia, the innocent girl who is fooled into social opprobium by Don Salvatore in *La terra trema*, Nadia the prostitute intrudes into the Parondi household as a threatening *femme fatale*. Her

presentation to the family—and to the spectators as well—takes place as she thrust through the apartment door and quickly after escapes through the bathroom window. Diegetic frames in the shot bracket the character within the visual frame itself—a plastic composition characteristic of Film Noir’s melodramatic conventions when it comes to introducing female characters. Her fleeting visit brings the family together, especially the men, foreshadowing its utter fragmentation. Inside the home, Nadia walks straight towards the family portrait. A panning shot analogous to the brothers’ ogling follows and eroticizes Nadia, zooming in as she fondles each and every brother on the photograph. There is no need to establish shot/counter shot intercutting in the sequence. In tacit allegiance with the spectator, the real brothers standing behind her take pleasure in the scene as Nadia’s touch brings family together in a collective desire of individual possession.

Nadia’s finger pinpoints each brother on the surface of the photograph and immediately recognizes its corresponding sibling in the room. The staccato movement of her finger slips into sensuous stroking of Vincenzo’s boxing pictures. Point of view shots situate the spectator in Nadia’s body, producing the uncanny effect of a fetishistic-narcissistic relationship vis-à-vis the image. We see ourselves as Nadia seeing: she wants the erotically charged male image, while the spectator is forced to yearn for the prostitute’s touch on his or her own corporeality.⁵ According to Italian studies scholar Ruth Benghiat, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* caused a storm of controversy when it was first released in October 1960 because of its eroticism and violence rather than its representations of urban poverty. Drawing upon Nadia’s original touch, I contend that the controversy springs from the shocking melodramatic rhetoric the film uses to act upon the viewer. Nadia is but one example of the moral dilemmas set forth in the movie to challenge the brothers’ collectivist values in a world of consumption and satisfaction of individual desire. Lest we forget, Nadia also falls prey of such a milieu. Unable to have Vincenzo who marries too soon, she will test her fate with the other boxers, Simone

⁵ At this point of the sequence, Nadia’s touch covers more than one quarter of the frame. Visconti’s exploration of an inversed erotic gaze on male characters goes back to his first film *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943), see particularly the eroticized zoom-in introduction of the male character Gino.

and Rocco. Unfortunately, she will realize too late how her desires met the Parondis' in a path of self-destruction and death.

Lacking an imposing extradiegetic narratorial agent, *Rocco* immerses the spectator in “absorptive realism”, a level of illusionism in which the spectator experiences a powerful sense of absorption in the diegesis, as if s/he would suspend disbelief and imagine him or herself witnessing an event happening in the real world (Singer, 2001, p. 50). Before going into the problematics of positionality regarding the Southern Question implied in such a narrative approach, a few words on melodrama are in order. Consistent to his adherence to Gramscian hermeneutics, Visconti portrays his characters via operatic behavior.⁶ In a crucial scene, humiliated Simone rapes Nadia in front of her new beau Rocco. Counterintuitively, Rocco then gives up Nadia to his brother Simone out of displaced desire. Rocco does whatever it takes to keep the family together. Such portrayal effectively produces a schism between intellectual observer and popular visual subject. The various paroxysms of pathos in the film aesthetically transform the experiential material that informs *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, as well as part of the popular imagination, if we grant some validity to the operatic hypothesis. Pathos renders morally readable the fate of migrant southerners for an audience thirsty for ethnocentrically edulcorated tears.⁷ For the migrants however, an epistemic violence on their subject positions is always already at hand. No longer individuals, they are reduced to types in the film—synecdochically alluding to grander problems of social mobility.

Portraiture is not the only visual means for bringing family together in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. The *mise-en-scène* is filled with mirrors. Practically all interior-shots carry one. While shop windows offer numerous angles for characters to reflect themselves throughout the cityscape. In closed quarters,

⁶ According to Gramsci, “[popular classes] are not literary-minded and the only literature that they know are the libretti of nineteenth-century operas, it happens that members of [such classes] behave ‘operatically’ [...] it is a matter of large masses and it is inevitably a question of culture. ‘Sober’ taste is individual, the other one is not; the national taste, that is, the national culture, is operatic” (Gramsci, 1985, p. 204).

⁷ For an analysis on melodrama’s moral legibility see Peter Brooks’ seminal 1974 book, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

mirrors act as markers of character development. Rocco resolves his moral dilemma of blindly assuming his brother's increasing debt in front of a baroque mirror. An over the shoulder tracking shot aligns character, his reflection, and a picture of an anonymous boxer in a single frame as Rocco chooses such dire a fate. In a similar vein Rocco discusses with Simone in shot/counter-shot sequences that focus on their reflections leaving their bodies in soft focus. Reflections mediate in climatic peripeteias crucial to Visconti kin melodrama. They bind characters together, they offer spectators pivotal scenes of individual moral dilemmas, and they also mediate between the two sides of the screen: them and us. Reflections offer spectators countless angles of emotional and physical violence, vicissitudes residing the North/South divide. Somehow the mirror image interpellates characters and spectators into a rapport of identifications. However, this is not to say that the screen surface of the movie theater does not impose an ethical wall isolating intra- from extra-diegetic identities. Characters relate between themselves. Spectators relate with the narrating "I", as I argue below.

Melodrama and visual surfaces bound the Parondis to urban self-destruction or individual economic stability. Each brother has a different outcome in the film depending on his rapport with city life. As mentioned above, Simone and Rocco are the least assimilated in their adoptive Milan. Rocco's unquestioned loyalty to his brother Simone leads him to follow his brother into boxing and misery. By the end of the film he is but an iterative image of a fleeting Southern success story in the big city, as suggested by the mechanically reproduced posters of his fighting stance covering city walls. Rocco has no place in Milan, for his tribalism has little space in the 1960s town. Let alone his stubborn innocence. Conversely, Vincenzo and Ciro are the most assimilated. Both have stable jobs and a promising familial working-class setting. By the end of the film they find themselves *ad portas* of future success. Ciro becomes an elite worker, an *operaio specializzato* at the Alpha Romeo factory. Vincenzo and his wife expect a second child. In the final analysis, Ciro is the arbiter of familial relations among the *dramatis personae*. With his rational and pragmatic mentality well suited for the

culture of assembly-line capitalism (Ben-Ghiat, 2001, p. 46), Ciro not only achieves the most complete assimilation; he also goes against his family's kinship values in order to ensure their process of integration to Northern practices and mores, thereby having no regrets to press charges against his own brother Simone.⁸

Ciro's will is reminiscent of 'Ntoni Valastro's. Despite his absolute urban assimilation, Ciro alludes to rural means of production. Several times he compares the family and his brothers with a tree and its seeds, respectively. Shortly before reporting Simone, he says to Rocco in a park: "We are seeds from the same plant, seeds that must produce healthy fruit. If one of these seeds is rotten, it must be separated from the others". It is no coincidence that he should share his botanic heuristics with the character that yearns the most for a return to the South. In the celebration sequence, Lucania becomes the film's *space of innocence*—melodrama's locus of nostalgia and lost happiness to which one may never return; and yet binds family, territory, and the promise of a brighter future affectively together.⁹ Rocco's speech, directed mainly at Ciro, builds such a place supported by the framing of the family's history in pictorial form. The close-up shot juxtaposes Rocco's emotive facial expression to the family picture and boxing success stories on the background, construing an audiovisual collage suffused with sentiment.¹⁰ Rocco says to his brothers:

There'll come a day, of course it's gonna be a while, that I'll go back to the country. And if I don't, maybe another one of us will be able to return to our land. Maybe you, Luca [cut to young Luca while he replies: "I also want to go back with you". Cut back to Rocco]. Remember Luca that our country is the

⁸ An analysis of the rational nature of the Ciro-Vincenzo dyad compared to the passionate thrusts that move the Rocco-Nadia-Simone triad surpass the limits of this paper. It is of interest, however, to inquire if an essentialist depiction of the North-South divide takes place in the movie in a melodramatic tension between rational and irrational polarities between these character groupings. For an analysis of melodrama as a ritual of confrontation between clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them from a defined community, see Peter Brooks's seminal work.

⁹ See Linda Williams' 2001, *Playing the Race Card*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ Comparing to *La terra trema's* fixed camera, this shot confirms Visconti's compositional aesthetics. For Visconti montage is more a matter of juxtaposing elements within the frame than conjoining two different frames together. Stressed by the use of mirrors, Visconti's compositional aesthetics consists of exploring the frame as a multi-planar visual surface.

land of olive trees. Of moonshine and rainbows. Do you remember, Vince', that a mason when he starts to build a house he throws a stone on the shadow of the first person that passes by? You [Luca] have to make a sacrifice in order to make the house become solid [emotional close-ups on Mamma, Ciro, and photograph of absent Simone].

The dialogue between Ciro and Rocco, a dialogue mediated by the temporal sequenciality of montage—and therefore mediated by an extradiegetic narrative agent—, converges their two territorial moral positions upon their youngest brother. Rocco in his speech relates the themes of home and sacrifice upon the youngest Parondi. In his turn, Rocco prefers to live his life paying Simone's debts on the fighting ring in order to guarantee family cohesion and rapport with the South. In the same vein, Ciro's seed and tree metaphor of familial relations proposes another rooting of kin.

Even though Ciro does not wish to return to Lucania, the final sequence of the film (lunch break on factory grounds) suggests that the production of a new worker culture can be forged from the fusion of Northern and Southern values (Ben-Ghiat, 2001, p. 46). There, Ciro speaks too of a personal sacrifice, one of temporarily loosing one's own family's trust for their future best interest. Visconti's allegiance to Gramsci's solution to the Southern Question shifts from utter denunciation in *La terra trema* to promise of realization in *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. During Ciro's lunch brake, Luca tells his brother that he wants to go back to the South if Rocco does. Ciro first explains that one day the family will understand why it was in their collective best interest to put Simone behind bars, and then he recalls previous days: "Simone explained everything to me [...] He told me that down in the South, good Christians live like poor animals, knowing only hard work and obedience. But also that everyone should get by without being a slave to anybody and without forgetting about his own duties". Returning to his botanic metaphor, he reads Simone's unfortunate transformation in the city from "good" to "bad herbs" and sees Rocco as a "saint" that cannot live in the "real world". Going back to his younger brother, Ciro says that the South awaiting Luca has also changed through time, dismantling Rocco's nostalgic

utopia in order to render it as a promising future for the next generation. Unlike Rocco's, *Ciro's South* is one of economical integration with the industrialized North: "You may go back one day [...] Down there they are realizing that the world is changing too. Some say that such a world would not be better. But I believe, Luca. I know your life will be more just and honest. Ah, the sirens. I have to go back to work. Give mamma a kiss from me". Later at a distance Luca shouts: "Ciro will you come home tonight? We will be waiting for you". The two siblings take separate ways, keeping the promise of a prompt reunion as the film comes to an end.

Rocco e i suoi fratelli comes full circle. Beginning and ending with family gatherings, the spiraling transformations of its members in urban space produce a new family from the old. The image of home and kinship serves as the platform for a larger project of rural and working class allegiance foreshadowing a new production culture. Visconti's parceled narrative brakes up the family, removes retardant elements for the ignition of this new machinery, and humanizes new means of production under the image of home as a promising space of innocence and ultimate goal. The portrayal of migratory tempestuous realities adopts through film a political agenda. Melodramatic conventions deplete each character's interiority and make him or her pure surface. In mirrors, photographs, even via the screen itself, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* fashions the Parondis as shallow—and yet crucial—constituents of a profound revolutionary whole of social transformation.

There's a synesthetic side to melodrama. We look at the screen while in our turn we are touched by its moving images. Visconti systematically presents once and again this synesthetic emotional relationship to shots, photographs, and pictures. The characters in his films look at pictures and have bodily reactions to them. They weep for family ties lost. We, ourselves, also have bodily reactions vis-à-vis the screen. We share Lucia's grief when her kin does not return from the *mare amaro*. We recoil at Nadia's pain when Simone penetrates her body. Five times with a blade. Because of moving images we recognize these characters' virtue through their suffering and will to thrive. However, I wish to stress that Visconti's rapport to the image—the

rapport he imposes on us regarding images—is static one. Intradiegetically speaking, *La terra trema* and *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* offer visual surfaces in stasis. Even if we consider Milano's mirror images, these lack movement in themselves. They require the character's motility to move. Visconti's characters are moved by images, and yet images in Acitrezza or Milano don't move by themselves.¹¹

To briefly return to *La terra trema*, moments before Cola leaves home he opens 'Ntoni's sea chest. Extradiegetic music—adding *melos* to drama—intervenes the shot with nostalgic overtones as Cola pulls out a strip of postcards from the coffer. He looks at them one by one, puts them back into the chest, and takes a picture of 'Ntoni in his sailor uniform. The still images carry for Cola a promise of an *au-delà*, a beyond the image, away from Acitrezza. Moments later he says to 'Ntoni: “We should have thrown those fish [the salted anchovies] in to the sea. I'm fed up with living here”. In a similar collective/individualistic values clash as Ciro and Rocco's, 'Ntoni responds: “You shouldn't talk like that. We were born in Trezza and we must die in Trezza”. Still images open up a window to other realities for Cola. They also arouse in him the desire to be where he is not, overstepping familial imperatives. Cola like his seafaring brother wants to see “the world”, that is to say, the North. Postcards and pictures offer him the possibility of a beyond the bounded space of Acitrezza mediated by the promise of other economies, and moving images.

3. Conclusion

La terra trema and *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* address issues of recognition, identity, and territory, through moving images. That is to say, employing images in movement as well as emotionally and aesthetically touching images. Visconti populates his films with photos and reflections, articulating

¹¹ In order to distinguish types of images I draw upon on Siegfried Kracauer's essay “Photography”, where he discerns photography from cinema based on movement and stasis. According to Kracauer, technology allows a mechanical automatic movement of cinematic images. They move by themselves, where as photography, painting, or even mirrors, move by means of human motility. See his *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

them through the deep shallowness of melodrama. The two films offer synecdochic accounts of familial and social realities, under the veil of committed ethnographic investigation rendered in filmic form. Visconti's gesture of "push[ing] neorealist investigation to the limit" makes use of ethnographic procedures and tropes (absorptive realism, obfuscation of narrative agents, legitimating diegetic artifice by having-been-there)¹² to create a fable of validation and realism. I particularly chose to address the matters of kinship through the sieve of filmic form in order to stress the superficial aspect of fashioning images of an Other. By superficiality by no means I mean lack of rigor or method. On the contrary, and inspired by the reflections of Siegfried Kracauer, I consider image use a defining element of our culture that may be the last and only means for political denunciation, ethical commitment, and modes of sociability in a present devoid of profundity.

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¹² These, among others, are ethnography's characteristic procedures and tropes according to Roberto González Echevarría's *Myth and Archive*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.