

# Crisis – What crisis? The jobless society and Italian cinema in the early 2000s

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## Abstract

This article proposes a synthetic analysis and contextualization of the most significant, thought-provoking films made in Italy during the first decade of the twenty-first century which thematize or in other ways convey the circumstances of today's growing social inequality. Such circumstances entail collective and individual trauma, loss of security and well-being in individuals and families, indeed an increase in family breakdown – in other words, a pervasive social crisis. The films examined are: F Comencini's *Mobbing* (*Mi piace lavorare*, 2003); Tavarelli's *Break Free* (*Liberi*, 2003); Cappuccio's *I Only Wanted to Sleep On Top of Her* (*Volevo solo dormirle addosso*, 2004); Amelio's *The Missing Star* (*La stella che non c'è*, 2006); Soldini's *Days and Clouds* (*Giorni e nuvole*, 2007); P Virzi's *A Whole Life Ahead* (*Tutta la vita davanti*, 2008); and Venier's *The 1000 Euro Generation* (*Generazione Mille Euro*, 2009).

While the extremely diverse richness of these films from the formal and existential viewpoint does not allow for their (un-systemic) commonalities to be captured by any specific formula, they do share one broad general attitude toward their public: they all refuse to manipulate it by exploitative narrative strategies (the term 'exploitative' here means that a film both *oversimplifies/dumbs down* and *spectacularizes* issues for box-office purposes). By their very complexity, these seven films put in place an *honest and intelligent mimesis* of the world that surrounds us and thus fulfil what can be argued to be the essential requirement of a solid realism.

## Keywords

economic crisis, Italian cinema, precariat, temping, temporary employment, unemployment

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And these precarious workers, what are they complaining about? At long last they no longer have to punch in every day, as people do in Soviet bureaucracies. They can work for two months and then plan a vacation for themselves, then come back and get another job. Me, in my life I've held many jobs, in fact I've been the first of all precarious workers . . . and I've come to the conclusion that what has been organized against me is a media campaign of hatred and envy.

Silvio Berlusconi on TV in *The Gospel According to Precario* (2005)<sup>1</sup>

Stories of economic crises and industrial conflict from the 1960s and 1970s abound in the Italian cinema of the times; indeed, they offered to filmmakers of that age the subject matter for some undying cinematic masterpieces. Yet, something downright uncanny seems to have happened since: when we watch today the Italy quintessentially captured in, say, Elio Petri's *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (*The Working Class Goes to Heaven*, 1971), we experience a disquieting sense of being on a visit to some kind of unknown space-time belonging to a long-lost prehistory: an age unconnected or, to be exact, no longer connected to our own epoch and traumatically removed from our memory. The film by Wilma Labate, *Signorinaeffe* (*Miss F[IAT]*, 2008), devoted to a major episode of crisis-conflict that occurred at the Turin FIAT factory of Mirafiori in 1980,<sup>2</sup> conveys to all of us the unmistakable aura of a retrospective reconstruction of a long-bygone past – and all the more so to those Italians who happened to experience such events first time around, if not literally first-hand. What was then *daily drama* has now become *history* . . . the kind of stuff we are normally used to reading about as having been epoch-marking and epoch-making for some remote, now long dispersed generation; and all this, in the course of a mere three decades.

Since the early 1980s, the economic circumstances of the industrialized West – and, with it, of the entire world – have changed beyond recognition. The crisis of the late 1970s was triggered by the two successive 'oil shocks' experienced in 1973 and 1979; the nature of the present crisis, in contrast, is linked to trade imbalances combined with financial speculation (i.e. historically an *unusually high level* of financial speculation), two phenomena that have led to the quick rise, in the industrialized West, of economic inequality, a.k.a. the hollowing out of the traditional middle class.<sup>3</sup> The surface-level manifestation of the former was industrial conflict – conflict between labor and capital – on factory floors; the latter is today made visible and tangible by the rapid shrinkage of the traditional type of employed workforce: the phenomenon that has by now come to be known as that of the 'jobless society'. And this was even *before* the bursting of the speculative bubble in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

This article, then, proposes a synthetic and necessarily cursory survey of a few significant films made in Italy during the first decade of our 21st century – the most significant, thought-provoking ones I have been able to identify in terms of relevance, impact on the public, and artistic accomplishment – which thematize or otherwise portray the circumstances of today's growing social inequality, occurring by way of a dramatic increase in 'precarious' employment.<sup>5</sup>

This entails collective and individual trauma, loss of security and well-being in individuals and families, indeed an increase in family breakdown . . . *crisis*, in other words. In *Palombella rossa*, as cinephiles know, Nanni Moretti had put a humorous twist on the word:

Crisis: worsening, decompensation, fit, paroxysm, modification, perturbation, difficulty, disarray, recession, depression, ruin, disequilibrium, disturbance, bewilderment, restlessness, *dis-con-cert!*<sup>6</sup>

Today, alas, Moretti's humor is essentially gone, and where it remains, this is only contingently so.

The number of films that address our concerns is fairly sizeable – this fact being, in itself, a reflection of the trauma's impact on Italian society – and I do not hope to be exhaustive.<sup>7</sup> I will focus on seven of them: Francesca Comencini's *Mobbing* (*Mi piace lavorare*, 2003); Gianluca Maria Tavarelli's *Break Free* (*Liberi*, 2003); Eugenio Cappuccio's *I Only Wanted to Sleep On Top of Her* (*Volevo solo dormirle addosso*, 2004); Gianni Amelio's *The Missing Star* (*La stella che non c'è*, 2006); Silvio Soldini's *Days and Clouds* (*Giorni e nuvole*, 2007); Paolo Virzì's *A Whole Life Ahead* (*Tutta la vita davanti*, 2008); and Massimo Venier's *The 1000 Euro Generation* (*Generazione Mille Euro*, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

My intention is to highlight the *diversity* of the solutions modulated by these seven films in addressing, or responding to, or acting within, their shared circumstances; and the best way to bring into relief such diversity is, I believe, to compare them analogically by their functional elements. I will thus examine, across the board, four factual areas in each of them and include in my discussion abundant contrastive commentary. After my tentative conclusion, an appendix that includes some of the seven films' best lines will follow, in an effort to characterize as much as possible their respective auras by a direct comparative sampling.

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The first round of this survey is devoted to sketching each film's *ostensible topic* with respect to employment, as well as each protagonist's *individual profession*.

(1) In *Mobbing*, Anna (Nicoletta Braschi) is the archetypal mid-career single mother at risk (the film is based on a number of actual occurrences brought to the attention of the CGIL labor union). Anna faces the downsizing of the firm where she works as an accountant, triggered by a recent hostile merger, and must endure a long string of incidents of mobbing (professional harassment) inflicted on her by her management. She is relegated further and further down the rungs of a professional inferno that reaches its climax when she is assigned to time the productivity of the blue-collar workers in the firm's warehouse; predictably, these workers resent her role and fight her presence tooth and nail.

(2) *Break Free* tells the story of a middle-aged worker, 'Cenzo (Luigi Maria Burruano), long employed at a chemical plant in the interior of the Abruzzo, whose

firm shuts down due to offshoring. 'Cenzo, now permanently unemployed, as a consequence suffers a collapse in his self-image and remains a sulking recluse in the family apartment in the village. Exasperated, in view of the approaching summer his wife leaves him and descends in search of work to the beach town of Pescara; the same break and the same glide down to the coast concurrently ensue with his son Vince.

Revealingly, father and son have the same name but, by a telling directorial wink, the father's gets reduced to its *last half*, while the son gets the *first half*, pointing to a symmetrical/complementary condition between the two to which I will return.

(3) The protagonist of *I Only Wanted to Sleep* acts on the opposite side of the fence to the one explored in *Break Free*: Marco (Giorgio Pasotti) is re-assigned overnight by the management of his microchip-selling company from the task of training and motivating (i.e. indoctrinating, fanaticizing) their human resources to the presumed 'mission impossible' of chopping in a few weeks' time (and without arousing the labor unions' ire) 25 people off the Corporate Office's payroll. Thus, from propagandist, ideologist, motivator and prophet of *laissez-faire* capitalism, Marco has to turn himself into a pitiless professional killer of colleagues he has been working with, colleagues who, as a rule, are many years his senior.

(4) *The Missing Star* takes us to Genoa to witness the closure of a steel mill, which is bought and packed up wholesale by a Chinese enterprise dealing in the same line of trade. Vincenzo Buonavolontà, a local technician in charge of maintenance, obsesses about a faulty mechanism included in the lot that has just sailed off for the Far East (the blast furnace has a defective control unit) and promptly sets out himself, a proper spare part in his satchel, on an adventurous voyage to a completely unknown destination – or in any case a destination that is completely unknown to him.

(5) As a historical hub of much of Italy's steel and armaments production and ship-building industry, Genoa is one of the Italian cities hardest hit today by the process of global offshoring, and it is for this reason that the town returns as the setting of *Days and Clouds*. However, in *Days and Clouds* we shift from a post-industrial landscape to a comfortably upper-middle-class environment in the city center. By means of a legal cavil Michele Olivieri (Antonio Albanese), formerly a partner in a marine equipment company, has been turfed out by his associates for resisting their profit-maximizing offshoring strategies, which have aimed at doing away with production on Italian territory. Now Michele shares something unexpected with the workers whose jobs he has in vain tried to protect: a common condition as a middle-aged man on the dole. But, unlike them, he is unable to accept such a state with the dignity that is historically rooted in the self-awareness of the Genoese working class.

(6) The sardonically titled *A Whole Life Ahead* tackles the ever-more diffuse condition described in English either as 'precariat' or 'permatemping', which is here set, as is often the case, in a large call center. The center, however, sits at the core of an unusually fraudulent Roman firm which pushes for the sale of clunky, expensive, useless contraptions touted to impecunious consumers as little less than miraculous, latter-day philosopher's stones. Meanwhile, the only philosopher in the whole story is the center's part-time phone operator, Marta (Isabella Ragonese), who, possibly on the strength of her university thesis on Heidegger, is able to juggle

not only the call center's systemic inauthenticity, but a number of other things besides this: her boyfriend's lack of commitment, her mother's terminal cancer, her work-mates' immaturity, her boss's sleazy advances, and the local labor unionist's lack of tactical nous. For the record, *A Whole Life Ahead* humorously seems to imply that someone who can survive Heidegger will survive anything; more later on such implied subtexts and in general on the comedic, tongue-in-cheek nature of this film.

(7) The social phenomenon that I suggest we describe by neither of the two vague labels *under-employment* or *precarious employment* (though precarious it certainly is), but more specifically by the concept of *improper employment* or *mis-employment*, is at the core of *A Whole Life Ahead*. But it is no less strikingly at the core of *1,000 Euros*, where Matteo, who holds a PhD in math from the University of Milan, acts as a volunteer teacher for his ageing professor, while having to support himself by dint of, well, precarious task-based contracts for a multinational telecoms company.<sup>9</sup> As the film opens, we see him dart out of the dingy flat he shares with juvenile-minded peers and literally run through Milan toward his office to join a team that is developing and marketing new scented, color-changing cellphone covers.<sup>10</sup>

The second point we need to survey is that of our protagonists' respective *partners and partners' roles*, alongside any other *family members* they may have.

(1) *Mobbing's* Anna is, as mentioned, a single mother; we know nothing about her estranged partner, except for the not particularly reliable bromides (about a 'sea captain' and suchlike) which she feeds to her admirably no-nonsense daughter Morgana (Camille Dugay Comencini) in order to reassure her about her fatherless lot in life. Anna's condition as an effectively unexplained single mother contributes strongly to making *Mobbing* what could be called an archetypal film about the vulnerability, on the job market and beyond, of women who find themselves in a situation just like Anna, having to fend off malevolence in their occupation while suffering the full burden of a breadwinner's responsibilities; it is just such a deliberate minimizing of the anecdotal that opens the film's path toward a vigorously universal nature. Similarly, the director's choice of Morgana's physical traits, which clearly indicate an immigrant ethnic heritage, has the merit of including in the film's picture of today's Italy the issue of immigration *without* spelling it out in the form of any specific contingency that in the process of reception might narrow down and demote, in our understanding, the two heroines' struggle for survival to some sort of incidental status. It arguably is the most challenging challenge of storytelling, in cinema as everywhere else, to find a happy 'identification-maximizing' medium between, at one end, excessively vague plots inhabited by excessively common characters, which render our sense of affinity with them tenuous at best, and at the opposite end, unduly eccentric stories thick with unduly bizarre situations, which (at least outside sit-coms, the grotesque genre, etc.) must strike their public as improbably capricious, lazily contrived, 'unreal'. By hitting the perfect note for a balanced compromise between these two extremes, *Mobbing* definitely scores top points in optimizing its plausibility.

(2) In *Break Free*, father 'Cenzo's descent into depression for all intents and purposes shuts him off from interaction with his son Vince (Elio Germano) and

his wife Paola (Anita Zagaria). The film is, in fact, largely a chronicle of the frictions between the three members of the family, with Vince caught right in the middle of his parents' tiff and experiencing, to boot, an urgent need to write his own life's *Bildungsroman*. Leaving to one side the shallowness of some scenes of 'entertainment' on the beach (which are in any case narratively necessary as a contrast for mountainside *ennui*), *Break Free* is a very rich film, which asks truly difficult questions: if one of two partners begins to sink into depression, is the other one justified in jumping ship and getting ashore on their own? Conversely, can we really with a clear conscience demand that our own unresolved troubles pull down other family members along with us?

Meanwhile, Vince's youthful, 'sunrise' experience acts in counterpoint to his father's 'sunset' one and intriguingly complements it. Whereas the father – the true Italian of the 1970s that he was – willingly took up a permanent and reasonably well-paid job in his chemical plant, the son – an authentic citizen of the entertainment-and-appearances-obsessed Berlusconi-land of the 2000s – swoops down from remote, barren highlands to a beachside restaurant just outside Pescara in order to work, seasonally and informally, as an assistant cook. Security? Fringe benefits? No fringe, but . . . there's the cute *cameriera*. That is *where jobs are found* in today's Italy; and no less importantly, *how they are desired*: unlike the slaves of the past, today we are all *free* (i.e. *Liberi!*) to 'choose' what we want to be from the shelves of life's supermarket. The contrast between the two distinct space-time contexts is so stark that any viewer of *Break Free* in the future is bound to establish an otherwise unexpected commonality between father 'Cenzo's world view and son Vince's existential attitudes on the basis of *both being the product of their respective, opposed historico-cultural environments*. Leaving to a future Zola the worthy task of showing systematically how each environment creates and stamps with a seal of authority its own predominant existential attitudes, I will later more modestly address the final outcome of young Vince's worldly and professional strivings.

(3) In line with any (rational) expectations triggered by the film's harsh title, sentimental and family issues are pretty grim in *I Only Wanted to Sleep*. At some point in the film, we incidentally learn that Marco's father was a factory worker who died of cancer from labor-related causes; his mother, with whom he has only scant and meaningless communication via his cellphone, has remained in the family flat. This and the fact that she can literally *only dream* of escaping from her home for an outing to the countryside during the Christmas vacations lead us viewers to picture Marco's background experience as a traumatic one endured in some miserable hole of what is today northern Italy's industrial rust belt. His past must obviously have been very bad indeed if, having burnt the bridges that could lead back to it, he is willing to go through the inhuman, kill-or-be-killed ordeal of his current job experience.

As we compare the present with a past that *I Only Wanted to Sleep* presents only 'between the lines' ('between the frames'), but no less eloquently for that, here we detect again (as we did in *Break Free*) the issue of two distinct and in many ways opposite Italies facing each other across two dramatically distinct centuries. However, whereas *Break Free* indicates that it is at least possible to feel nostalgia



for the Italy of old, *I Only Wanted to Sleep* slams the door shut on any possible temptation to follow such a route. 'I must work!' ('Devo lavorare!') at all costs, and may everyone else perish, is the uncanny closing squawk uttered by Marco in the film's final frames, as the mechanical guillotine of an elevator door *closes* his story, in the same manner as the fall of a tombstone would. This is the pretty terrifying utterance of someone who appears to have been so victimized by a victimizing system that he will be ready, before being hurt again, to offer others as sacrificial victims to the very same system that now threatens him. This is, of course, the system's very purpose and the guarantee of the system's perpetuation.

How about the 'sleeping' in *I Only Wanted to Sleep*? Yes, that 'sleeping' is indeed a figure of speech (a euphemism, a sinecdoche, a euphemistic synecdoche) standing in for 'having sex' – for whatever little sex, that is, Marco manages to squeeze in, during the rare lulls he can carve from his all-consuming murder mission, with his caring and affectionate but definitely incensed girlfriend Laura (Cristiana Capotondi). It is beside the point to survey here the fits and starts of their, if nothing else, athletic but nevertheless deeply neurotic and ultimately unsatisfactory, relationship. (The neurosis is a telling point made by the film about its neurotic anti-hero's compromised ethical condition.) What does matter for our purposes, linked to the issue of employment and unemployment in Italian society, is that *Laura is herself out of a job and cannot find one*. This is, to be sure, a tongue-in-cheek feature deliberately injected into the film's plot for purposes of creating an ironic foil to Marco's choice of knavery.

(4) In *The Missing Star*, the mid-career, now unemployed technician Vincenzo Buonavolontà has no family; but this happens for reasons that are not presented to us on the psychological plane. He is a loner without a history, a source, a spring of his own – and, for that matter, with no 'real(istic)' name either. He is more of a meta-physical hero, one only endowed with a *telos*. A delirious latter-day Quixote, he only knows of one such goal: to 'restore the control unit', as his surface-level *idée fixe* runs, for a mode of production that has run out of control in Italy during the past generation, and will surely do so again in contemporary China if we are not able to rein back today's economic system to some kind of rationality. Such a strategy of transposition-by-analogy qualifies *The Missing Star* as a typical Amelian journey that retrieves elsewhere, as though via a time-machine, conditions experienced earlier in Italy (*Lamerica* had done so in 1994 by taking us to Albania).

The only counterpart to be found in this metaphysical film to Buonavolontà's non-psychological persona is his equally non-psychologically presented Chinese Mentrix Liu Hua (Ling Tai). She acts as a Virgil of sorts to blank-slate 'Dante' Buonavolontà during their fairly hellish exploration of today's rapidly industrializing China; and, unsurprisingly given the labor-intensive narrative role which her character has to fulfil toward the untrained outsider, she is unencumbered by a partner of her own. A loneliness-on-loneliness situation works a treat during meta-physical journeys – and it works even better here, where cultural differences add a surplus layer of problems in interpersonal communication. To be sure, Liu Hua does have a child; in this, she is a single mother like Anna in *Mobbing*. However, unlike

Anna, Liu Hua accepts with fatalistic meekness being separated from her child. Liu Hua endures as inevitable her condition of solitude, tossed about like a cork as is everyone else in the colossal whirlpool of the modern capitalistic society: today's China, other countries in the past. 'Sugarcane is never sweet at both ends,' she whispers, in the tone of voice one would accompany a funeral, upon reporting to Buonavolontà on an enormous new dam scheduled to displace millions of people... eliciting from him the impenetrable commenting sigh: 'Progress!'

(5) In *Days and Clouds*, by contrast, we find a discernible striving – supported, in terms of cinematic technique, by a rich chromatic palette, thoughtful panning, symbol-creating framing – to emulate the depth contained in the best psychological analyses produced during the nineteenth century by European classics of the appropriately labeled 'poetic realism': Fontane, Gončarov, the late works of Flaubert. Psychology is everything here; and so it is that Michele's emotional trauma in losing his business along with his family's apartment and his self-esteem is painstakingly interwoven with the corresponding feelings that, in such dire straits, affect his wife Elsa (Margherita Buy) and his young adult daughter Alice (Alba Rohrwacher). Leaving to one side the nuances more directly related to interpersonal dynamics, which would lead us to charting a separate course into a different universe, what we need to sharpen our focus on for our present purposes are Elsa's and Alice's respective positions within Italy's current labor market. Here, too, our indirect interrogation of the film in search of specific social patterns of behavior leads to telltale signs. As befits a well-to-do *signora*, in the good days Elsa had first devoted herself to being a full-time housewife and mother. Then, when Alice grew up, Elsa turned to the quintessentially non-remunerative goal of pursuing graduate studies in art history, with a specialty in the restoration of frescoes.<sup>11</sup> Now that globalized capitalism has brought 7 years of lean cows to her stable – or rather, now that the imbalances of today's globalized capitalism have rendered the cows of a privileged tiny minority fatter than ever, while starving to death the cows belonging to everyone else in the same country – well, now she realizes that she must adapt.

Accordingly, Elsa begins to temp at a call center, then at a maritime broker's office. Such experiences bring about Elsa's own share of grief, whose details need no in-depth exploration here, but she knows and accepts that she has no other choice if she and her family are to survive somehow. 'The family', however, is just the problem: Michele is accustomed to being in charge and to doing things his own way, and thus absolutely lacks any of the basic tools necessary to deal with the misfortunes of a crushed career (whether such tools be self-irony, or fatalism, or religious faith, or bibliophilia, or a long-repressed wish to practice mountain climbing... whatever). So the anger-driven Michele does just about everything wrong. Meanwhile, Alice and her boyfriend Ricky run a successful ethnic restaurant in the center of Genoa, despite having long been looked down upon by conformist Michele precisely for that reason. However, far from finding their lot beneath them, as Michele has always argued, Alice and Ricky enjoy it and thrive by it. Their perspective shows us an Italy drastically different, and in many ways more interesting, than that known to earlier generations.



(6) As already mentioned, *A Whole Life Ahead* is a (very serious) comedy – this is a Paolo Virzì movie, after all – endowed with a complex, ambitious plot: a plot as ‘multiple’ as is promised by the name of the fraudulent company for which Marta works. Who surrounds Marta and how do such people interact with her? Her boyfriend Roberto is most easily dispatched: he has just obtained a PhD in a scientific discipline and when offered a chance he does not hesitate for a nanosecond to fly to California for an obviously promising career overseas. (No prizes for guessing whether he could have found adequate employment in Italy, where he has had to support his graduate studies by working as a dog-sitter and dog-walker). Marta’s mother, a retired high school teacher of classics, is in Palermo, ill with terminal cancer, and Marta goes to see her when she can – rarely, that is. Alas, if *A Whole Life Ahead* shows us an old Italy definitely teetering on the edge of its grave, the young Italy we see in the film is well-nigh dead from a mental and emotional viewpoint. Marta’s male fellow-workers at the firm – they are all salesmen, while the women clock up appointments from their phone booths – are better shunned than associated with: the most aggressive among them, nicknamed ‘Lucio 2’ (Elio Germano), presses Marta with his courtship, but his disgusting insistence on extending salesperson techniques into his private life utterly repel his targeted ‘buyer’. The other female workers, too, tend, out of variable mixes of indifference, conformism, and naïveté, to be conniving with the perverse economic mechanism in which they are trapped; the only one with whom Marta manages to have an acceptable relationship is the financially hard-up but *simpatica*, ‘aren’t-I-adorably-goofy’, airhead Sonia (Micaela Ramazzotti). In sum, it wouldn’t take a confirmed Heideggerist to understand that, even long before we look at the firm’s management (on which more later), the Italy Marta sees around her amounts to a pretty hopeless, distressed and distressing universe.

But there is one exception; and that exception is Lara (Giulia Salerno), Sonia’s 5-year-old daughter, who, having met Marta in the Rome subway, on the spur of the moment chooses her as the ideal finalist for the babysitter position that she and her often-absent mother are desperately needing to fill. Marta now moves in with them, thus becoming for all intents and purposes an adoptive mother to the brightest character in the entire film. If we juxtapose this situation to the one we find in *Mobbing*, where Anna and her daughter Morgana create a similarly effective hub of humanity and stability at the center of a pan-peninsular whirlwind of greed, callousness, hypocrisy, stupidity, arrogance, ignorance and vulgarity, we become tempted to ask, paraphrasing De Sica, whether here indeed ‘The Children Are Watching Us Again’ – and in an equally stern manner – almost 70 years after their original input. If only cinema could be such an early symptom, offer us such a premonition of re-birth! We could then have some justified hope for one more re-founding, in the near future, of a motherland prostrated in morals *and* morale, a hope of just the kind that De Sica’s neo-realism began to offer in the dying days of Italy’s dictatorship.

(7) The obliteration of middle-aged, middle-class Italy continues apace in *1,000 Euros*, albeit with no obvious advantage for the well-being of the up-and-coming

youth. As we saw, the not only underemployed and precariously employed, but indeed improperly employed Matteo lives with some flat-mates in Milan; we never learn a thing as to whether he has a family or not. If he does, it must be in Rome or thereabouts (he sports a thick Roman accent); what kind of demonic eradication, then, has transported him to the city alluded to in common parlance as the '(im)moral capital' of the North? We never find out about that either.

As though in compensation, Matteo has a high, somewhat irrational number of female partners swirling around him. All of these, lo and behold, suffer variously from different types of the same ailment: a problematic kind of employment. Valentina (Francesca Inaudi) is about to pack and get out of Matteo's life: now a (presumably unpaid, 'volunteer') doctor-in-training in the ER of a public hospital, she suddenly realizes that both she and he have long forgotten the reasons – if any – why, a lot earlier in their respective graduate curricula, they got together in the first place. Poised to succeed Valentina is the blonde Angelica (Carolina Crescentini), who works in the same scented phone covers company as Matteo, only on a higher floor and with higher responsibilities: she is Assistant Director Marketing. This fact, having fortuitously caught wind of what Matteo thinks about marketing personnel, the attractive boss carefully avoids mentioning to the lower-ranking hunk when she initially markets herself to him. Last but not least in the film's story appears the equally attractive brunette Beatrice (Valentina Lodovini), a passionate and sincere young woman who has lived all her life in Umbria and has now come to Milan seeking a replacement teaching job in one of the big city's high schools . . . she, too, of course a *precaria* all over again.

Such an all-female picture needs to be balanced by mentioning Francesco, Matteo's exuberant and *inter alia* cinephile flatmate and best confidant; we may or may not like him, but he unquestionably provides the film with a well-rounded metadiscursive dimension and certainly with some of its best punchlines. On what subject? To noone's surprise, mostly on the conditions of Italian society and the Italian job market.

Our third concern is now to examine the role played in our model-case films by, respectively, 'friends' and 'foes' of our variously employed – or unemployed, or under-employed, or improperly employed – protagonists. It seems logical that we consider the labor unions as being foremost candidates among their *adjutants*; in contrast, the notion of a specific identity for their respective *adversaries* is more elusive, as we shall see.

(1) In these two respects, *Mobbing* presents a fairly straightforward situation: Anna works in a large firm (employing over 15 people), probably the Italian branch of some multinational corporation, for which the protective clauses set forth in Article 18 of the *Statuto dei lavoratori* therefore apply. This allows her to have access to the advice of the local CGIL labor union branch, thanks to whose counsel she is able to win the lawsuit she brings against her employer on the grounds of the mobbing she has had to endure. Symmetrically, the main culprit for Anna's predicament is the frankly unpleasant, and yet all in all pretty anonymous, Chief Human Resource Officer who harasses her. Importantly, one must in all candor

observe that a lot of the hostility Anna suffers is shown by the film to come from her very fellow workers, not only in the warehouse. Many of them seem strangely oblivious to the fact that, if she is aimlessly tossed about the firm's HQ with meaningless or downright absurd tasks, this cannot possibly be put down to her own choice. Few of them seem to be able to see through the management's preordained plan to divide their subjects so as better to rule over them.

(2) The situation presented in *Break Free* occupies the opposite end of the spectrum. Here, the labor unions are able to do absolutely nothing to help the workers counter the planned closure of their chemical plant; their battle proves to be a hopeless rearguard one.<sup>12</sup> Equally ineffective are the attempts carried out by local government in re-training the workers for alternative forms of employment in the region's national park. They seem to prefer the status of technicians in a polluted environment to open-air work in a high-elevation environment with obvious potential as a tourist destination; all mountains are seen as worthless by them, precisely because that is where they grew up.

As for the identity and rationale of their antagonist, the film carefully avoids any specific reference to who might be acting for what reason; the capitalistic market mechanism is here left opaque and inexplicable, a fatally given fact not susceptible to any further analysis.

(3) *I Only Wanted to Sleep* is set in the Corporate Office, i.e. the HQ, of the microchip-selling Meta Technology Industries and so it is not surprising that the presence of the labor unions should be subdued there. Accordingly, we never detect them in action in the film. However, the presence of legal protection for workers is still indirectly felt in the story, via the management's need to wrest(le) from its employees a 'spontaneous' letter of resignation; that is the very feature imparting sense on Marco's efforts to bribe, bamboozle, or browbeat his own fellow workers into doing his bidding. Thus, a specific legal framework is very much in place in *I Only Wanted to Sleep*, so much so that Marco's former section boss, upon hearing about the task Marco has been reassigned to, contrastively warns him: 'Even a cretin can fire people in the States . . .', implying that things are quite different in Italy.

The insights with which his former boss prolongs his recommendations for Marco to obtain resignation upon resignation from his workmates are, in their own way, enlightening:

Offer a kick in the ass to the old guys; give as little as possible to those who have one or two years left before retirement; put the young ones on a bus, and drive it into a ravine. Or: desk under a staircase, absurd tasks, secretaries who spit at [them] when they see [them], and after a week they'll come to you singing that they accept [your offer].<sup>13</sup>

*I Only Wanted to Sleep*, in other words, clearly describes the very same world as *Mobbing* does – only, from the opposite side of the barricade.

(4) Describing the role played in *The Missing Star* by either workers' unions or by any sworn enemies of employees and employment is not a lengthy affair: there are none worth mentioning. Today's China is portrayed in the film – and, on that

evidence, probably is in fact – a gigantic cauldron of capitalist anarchy, a nightmarish landscape duplicating the European industrial revolution of Dickensian fame.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, no one restricts employment in today's China: the absolute imperative there (as was the case in the Italy of *Rocco and His Brothers*) is to cash as one cash can. This would be altogether normal and healthy – if only, as our Buonavolontà in vain attempts to suggest, the local economic machinery had a functioning control valve to prevent it from running amok.

(5) *Days and Clouds* offers a different and fairly special viewpoint on issues of employment. This holds true not so much for any special role labor unions may have in Genoa – when factories are boarded up and/or sold abroad, labor unions everywhere prove powerless to influence international mechanisms – as it does for the internal dynamics of today's established Italian companies who simply choose to relocate production abroad. (Marchionne's FIAT, anyone?) Now, in *Days and Clouds* Roberto and his new business partner Morelli, who have ejected Michele from joint ownership, adopt just such a strategy of relocation. In so doing they lower their input costs and thereby increase their own profits, which they may bank on behalf of their company or pay out to themselves, the shareholders, as income from capital gains: capital gains which, *nota bene*, are taxed *at a much lower marginal rate than income from labor*. Meanwhile, their former employees who have been let go (as has, obviously, Michele) are suffering devastating economic and psychological consequences from which thousands of them, alongside their families, will never recover.

Thus, indeed, by such a simple mechanism, are 'winners' and 'losers' created in today's global society/societies. Contrary to dogma, the present form of capitalism 'without a control valve' really does amount to a type of zero-sum game, where one person's gain is a loss for someone else, or for many other people. The *average* wealth does not change (when I have two chickens and you have none we have, on average, one chicken each); what does change is its *distribution*. The ultimate consequences of such a state of affairs are not merely ethically repulsive; they are pragmatically dangerous, too. What is an economic crisis? It is the paralysis that occurs when the system has created so many 'losers' sloshing about that it is no longer able to sell the goods and services produced by the businesses owned by the 'winners'. Crisis, what crisis? There is nothing remotely mysterious about it; its mechanisms are fairly plain for all to see, and *Days and Clouds*, among many other things, contributes to making them crisper and clearer still.

(6) The archetypal polar opposition between management and labor unions is masterfully presented in *A Whole Life Ahead*, although (or perhaps precisely because) its appearance is filtered through a consistently comic narrative *skaz*. Claudio Santarosa (Massimo Ghini), the firm's dishonest owner-manager, is quite naturally hell-bent on keeping the labor unions out of his turf and 'private property'; the rhetoric he uses is, unsurprisingly, the time-tested presentation of the company as 'one big family', intent on caring equally for all. Well, some family... given that Claudio is a human wreck, captive within a wrecked family of his own.<sup>15</sup> Claudio's troglodytic, patronizing presumptuousness in wooing Marta is downright pathetic, indirectly (or perhaps not so indirectly) shining a sharp directorial comment on the

quality of the ruling/managerial class responsible (if that's the word) for the fortunes, or otherwise, of Italian capitalism as we speak.

That said, a no less strong directorial scepticism seems to affect the film's portrayal of the Italian labor unions, whose sole representative there is the clumsy, far from *comfort*-bringing Giorgio Conforti (Valerio Mastandrea).<sup>16</sup> What does Giorgio actually do to convey such a screen-piercing aura of incompetence? Beyond his awkward personal demeanor, nothing is professionally wrong. (Indeed, this may be the director's very point.) Quite the contrary, in the public areas outside the firm's premises Giorgio goes the extra mile trying to link up with the as yet un-unionized telephone operators in the workforce; he arranges for an investigative TV report denouncing Multiple's exploitative management; and (with Marta's help) organizes an awareness-raising theater show in the community on the same subject. How much more zealous can one get? But ultimately none of these moves has an effect, and when Sonia is fired Giorgio is unable to help her. In line with the adage *ridendo dicere verum*, the two serious truths which *A Whole Life Ahead* humorously brings to our attention are therefore, on the one hand, that call-center workers in Italy (to say nothing of salespersons) really *do* have a very weak legal framework to protect their rights; and on the other that, as Marta reproachfully reminds Giorgio, for many of her peers really 'this s\*\*\* job is the only chance they have'.

(7) Friends and foes of our hero are characterized in *1,000 Euros* by much the same features we have already found in *I Only Wanted to Sleep*, a film which *1,000 Euros* in many ways resembles. That is to say, first, that in *1,000 Euros* the role of labor unions is only remarkable for its absence: the setting (corporate HQ) and the legal framework (based on the new temporary contracts/project-based contracts already mentioned) creates, as compared to past practice, an environment of perfect disposability of personnel. This mechanism acts destructively in every possible sense, beginning with a devastating systemic failure to optimize the use of each person's skills and abilities. In *1,000 Euros* we see in a crystal-clear manner that the fundamental, crippling failure of today's presumed hyper-efficient capitalism consists precisely in its *inability to pass its own test of efficiency*: it dooms itself by its own logic. (I don't presume to be the first in our century, or in any century for that matter, to note this.)

Second, the subjective role played by any specific unsavory or otherwise ill-willed character – in *1,000 Euros*, the expatriate middle manager Mark, for example – plays a distant second fiddle to much larger faceless mechanisms, nay, pales into utter insignificance in comparison to them. Where have all the cinematic baddies of the past gone? With the partial exception of *Mobbing*, the aggregate of our seven case study films 'about the labor market' in Italy's early-twenty-first-century employment crisis shows a curious, peculiar, specific effacement of the usual role of the 'bad guy', the evildoer traditionally aiming to attract the public to the theaters for a satisfactorily traditional cops-and-robbers or horror movie. It is a fairly uncanny experience to see how in our seven sample films the cops are all gone; the scattered remaining 'robbers' amount to nothing more than a sorry, itself disposable bunch of neurotic,

bleary-eyed MBAs; and only an impersonal horror remains. (Could this perhaps be a sad new filmic genre?)

The consideration last made quite naturally leads us, in closing, to the analysis of a fourth aspect that plays a crucial role in how we read, interpret and assess *authorial intentions*: an assessment of intentions that is, in turn, indispensable for us to justify ultimately evaluative concepts for a film. I am alluding to the issue of the authorial usage of *peripeteia* (or turning point) and *narrative closure*.

(1) Anna's destiny in *Mobbing* changes, as we saw, when she finally realizes that being nice and meek won't get her anywhere and will in fact only aggravate her condition as a victim. She then sues her multinational employer for professional harassment; wins her case; and is awarded retrospective wages and damage compensation. This turning point in the plot leads to a technically satisfactory outcome for her and Morgana, crowned by a short vacation which mother and daughter can now afford to take. Not only that, Anna eventually finds other, apparently more desirable employment. Her *peripeteia* comes at a point very close to the end of the film, with the final happy resolution following hard on its heels. This narrative structure has three interrelated implications: first, we see Anna in pain through just about the entire film; second, the happy ending introduces a drastic break with the preceding events; third, the story's outcome is strongly closed and strongly signifying – it projects meaning back across the foregoing events, marking them as narratively negated and overcome. The film, then, ends on a classic note of catharsis: a traditional note, for sure, and probably one that is a touch too optimistic.

(2) In *Break Free*, father and son clearly experience their narrative *peripeteia* during their final major conversation on a bench by the beach, where they have an archetypal open-hearted exchange about the immutable invariants of *coming of age* vs. *aging* in an ever-changing world. (It somehow seems that coming of age vs. aging in an ever-changing world has indeed been *the* existential issue for humanity more or less since the beginning of recorded time). The two men do not actually end their dialog by explicitly agreeing on a formula of the kind '*Ut es, fui; ut sum, eris*' (I was you; you will be me), yet some such strong emotion seems to occupy their minds by the time they part.

With that liberating tête-à-tête behind us, we viewers may proceed to ponder the film's epilogue, where the complementary narrative roles of father and son leave us with some interpretive ambiguity. On a surface level, we witness old 'Cenzo dancing one last time with his now estranged wife to the self-explanatory tune 'I will survive', the soundtrack's ubiquitous song; we are thereby *prima facie* invited to conclude that he will eventually be able to put himself together and start his life anew, somehow, somewhere. Meanwhile, young Vince is admitted to college and moves to Rome to pursue the elusive academic studies that in the past proved to be beyond his father's grasp. Thus Vince, too, seems well qualified to appropriate the film's theme song as alluding to his own destiny... all the more so, because the film shows us the cute *cameriera* Genny joining him in Rome at the last minute. Do we then find here narrative closure, characterized by a double happy ending, a reassuring 'don't



worry, all will be well' simplistic message? Well, yes, no, and maybe; this is where *Break Free* proves more intelligently problematic than at first it seems to be. At a deeper structural level, I would argue that precisely *if* the film's point is to establish an 'eternal present'/'eternal return' situation of sorts, where Vince + 'Cenzo = first  $\frac{1}{2}$  + second  $\frac{1}{2}$  = *one* 'Vincenzo' keeps reincarnating at every generation, it *then* follows that what young Vince is about to find in Rome will be a destiny in its own way equivalent to that experienced by his father 'Cenzo in the mountains of Abruzzo. Capitalist crisis or no capitalist crisis, something akin to a universal human condition.

(3) The narrative structure of *I Only Wanted to Sleep* resembles that of a thriller: it is based on a countdown mechanism, building an ever-growing tension via the trope of *iteration*. (The other dominant interest-rousing trope in the film is *variation*: at Marco's every new encounter with a victim we wonder if, and how, he is going to pull off his trick *this* time). Accordingly, psychological evolution, with its attendant notion of peripeteia, is not a strong factor in this film; what viewers are really held in suspense for are the details of Marco's success or failure. In such circumstances, the resolution is brought about by a narrative act that is both *peripeteia* and *outcome at the same time*. When Jean-Claude announces to Marco that he is fired because he has only managed to dispatch 24 employees, while the target he had been assigned was 25, Marco understands that he has been duped from the word go and takes back his freedom of action: he triumphantly retorts that no, 25 it really is – and tenders his own resignation. My productivity prize, thank you very much... and what moral satisfaction! Unfortunately, Marco's 25th good deed cannot undo the damage caused by his previous 24 despicable ones. He now really has met the target set by the Central Office of (Sub)Human Resources Europe... Shareholders may feel satisfied: Christmas or no Christmas, their money will never sleep.

What, then, of such a *gran finale* where peripeteia and epilogue coincide? It truly is a sad outcome for this chilling drama, conceived in a style that is part Poe, part Dürrenmatt. But, given the premise, what other conclusion was *realistically* available at this point for the implied filmic narrator? The story told in *I Only Wanted to Sleep* is a gallows grotesque (and, by no coincidence, black is the ubiquitous dominant color throughout the movie): a gallows grotesque that, for all its improbability at the literal level, forces us to watch intently the mechanisms hidden today inside the black box of the real.

(4) As befits a metaphysical story – distinct from a simple parable/allegory, which almost by definition has a direct referential axe to grind – *The Missing Star* does not 'close' at all; the various parallel themes in its fugue simply do not converge, but carry on into infinity...into the infinite spaces of interior China. Liu Hua's face remains, in the film's concluding freeze frame, staring forever into an open emptiness: an excellent metonymy (the *space* in lieu of the *person*) to symbolize the open-endedness of humanity's collective destiny as it gets caught up in this extremely recent, earth-ripping novelty called industrial capitalism. Is it 'progress', as Buonavolontà has hermetically observed, or tragedy? Only time will correctly decipher our present deeds – and by then it could be too late.

As for Liu Hua's 'Italian' travel partner (a Roman acting with a Neapolitan accent and posing as a resident of Genoa...), Vincenzo may now return home, secure in the false persuasion of having accomplished his mission. We know what he does not: namely, that in reality the Chinese workers to whom he has entrusted his precious mechanical item have looked at it in perplexity and, believing themselves to be in possession of far better ones, have tossed it out on a scrapheap. Nothing new there: those workers have done nothing more and nothing less than what hubris has always caused humanity to do with any perceived 'outside' (hence, unintelligible) wisdom. That said, one can detect no despair in Amelio's metaphysical meditation on the human condition; possibly, just a touch of Camusian *révolte*. How so? Even if the persuasion of having accomplished our duty should retrospectively turn out, in absolute terms, to have been a fallacious one, this condition at least gives a sense to our lives *while we live them* and therefore proves to be, although factually ineffective, certainly not useless for us in our lives.

(5) In *Days and Clouds*, the turning point in Elsa's and Michele's crisis is not reached before both of them, in totally dissimilar fashions, have touched bottom. An especially painful argument between the two ensues; exasperated, Michele abandons the conjugal home (not, be it understood, the earlier nice and affluent one which the couple has had to sell, but the dinky, noisy chicken coop of an apartment they have now traded down to). He goes to spend the night at the place of the only acquaintances he knows who are willing and able to put him up for the night: that is to say, his much-chided (by him) daughter and son-in-law. This forced exercise in humility turns into a belated rediscovery of commonsense and of a healthy will to life on Michele's part: the next morning, he feels ready to try out something completely different for the future. Accordingly, he joins Elsa at her restoration site. There, much silence and the presence of brilliantly recovered fresco images manage to multiply for us viewers, thanks to Soldini's superior use of many simultaneous communicative codes, the effect of the scant words exchanged by the almost-but-not-quite estranged couple. Elsa and Michele now realize that they are not, after all, willing to close the dialogue they opened many years in the past; in everyone's *days, clouds* are bound to come and go, and so are relatively transitory things such as employment issues.

Are there any practical implications from such a cogently filmed introspective odyssey? At the anecdotal level, the discombobulated Michele seems set to join – in the off-screen parafilmic time that 'begins' after the film's end – his daughter's and son-in-law's restaurant business as their bookkeeper and warehouse manager. There he might find, from a welcome position of cooperation with the younger generation, a solid point of reference from which to rebuild his own self-esteem. This strikes as a good specific plan driven by laudable intentions. Certainly, the more general notion that a country whose well-being has historically been founded on an export-led economy may still thrive by having its citizens serve each other New Age meals remains to be tested over the long term.

(6) The peripeteia and outcome of *A Whole Life Ahead* show the tradition of the *commedia all'italiana* operating at its very best. We know that nothing

seems to be able to break the gridlock at Multiple and correct the firm's misbehavior, least of all the labor unions' involvement; nothing changes there even in the aftermath of an effectively criminal episode when 'Lucio 2' goes berserk at an old lady's home, stealing €300 from his customer-victim. Where, then, shall the plot find the necessary *deum ex machina* to reach its disentanglement and conclusion? Well, an ideal *dea ex machina* now intervenes in the form of virally possessive Daniela (Sabrina Ferilli), Claudio's mistress, who shoots the coward dead (he has made her pregnant, but refuses to marry her) and is then led away by the police in front of the entire shell-shocked workforce. While such an ending might seem to be the ultimate triumph of narrative and interpretive *closure*, it is anything but, the point being that Claudio's death brings about receivership status for his firm and thus shakes up the plot toward an open-ended administrative situation. Such a suspension then extends into the profilmic space that stretches out into infinity after the story's end. What will be the ultimate outcome with respect to the fundamental issue in the film, *the fate of a host of improperly employed youths*? About that we know nothing.<sup>17</sup> That is the undecided space where *A Whole Life Ahead* invites us to think about outcomes as yet to be determined regarding the future of Italian society. Virzì thereby creates an equivalent to the now classic, Brechtian 'BOH?' utterance that ended Scola's archetypally suspended comedy/non-comedy/serious comedy about Italy's fate from more than one generation ago, *We All Loved Each Other* (*Ci eravamo tanto amati*, 1974).<sup>18</sup>

(7) From a narratological viewpoint, *1,000 Euros* can be described as a fairly neurotic film: it doesn't seem to know where it wants to go. Matteo, its protagonist, without ever really changing (psychological evolution is beside the point in this story) keeps reversing himself at the slightest whiff of a narrative about-face – especially if the whiff is scented and the face is a pretty one. There are not one, but probably half a dozen mutually similar peripeteias in *1,000 Euros* . . . and it is possible that *that* is the film's very point. As a synecdoche for all of today's youth, Matteo is haunted and confused by an excess of interchangeable but ultimately indifferent pseudo-options, all duplicating one and the same (un)reality: a pheno-'reality' which seems outwardly appealing but in actual fact is phoney, shallow, boringly repetitive.

After a series of rapid-fire (and hence pretty undramatic, unengaging) U-turns, Matteo eventually scorns Angelica's corporate choice of hopping from 'opportunity' to 'opportunity' and opts instead for small-world Beatrice, who some day will hopefully become a tenured teacher. Does he really mean it, *this* final time? Perhaps. And Beatrice is certainly presented in the film as the sincerest and most reliable of Matteo's possible partners. With her Matteo, if nothing else, avoids the fate of Buridan's ass, which starves to death in its 'perfectly rational' (capitalistic?) hesitation between two perfectly equivalent alternatives. And her passion, which she stresses, to become a teacher despite her awareness of «the humiliations» thereby entailed, strikes a refreshingly well-meaning note for a country where it now seems normal for the young to argue, as Matteo disconsolately does, that 'since you cannot do what you love, you might as well force yourself to like what you hate'.

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No summarizing statement can be made, beyond the detection of a commonly concerned, caring gaze, about these recent case study films that stage stories in and around the Italian workplace at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As I hope to have shown, each of them contains a strong, unique kernel of significance, which can hardly be further reduced, assimilated, or homogenized, and which triggers its own specific reflection on the global condition in our age.

Among the diverse issues with which these seven films deal, we find workers' and specifically *young* workers' exploitation (in pretty much all the films), capitalistic anarchy, individual solitude, personal opportunism, managerial divisiveness, loss of identity and self-respect, a lack of awareness about one's own manipulated condition (aka a lack of class consciousness), gender issues (although in many respects *both* women and men are here on *both* sides of the exploitation fence), intra-marriage dynamics in economic perspective, self-exploration, self-development, parent-progeny rapports in different age brackets: childhood, adolescence... We have furthermore identified *mis-employment* as the major recurring problem subtending most of the others. Such topoi are richly debated in our sample group and almost each one of them could justify further, concentrated, separate treatment elsewhere.

Among the directorial attitudes that we can detect in these films there are variable, and variably mixed, amounts of fatalism, sober lucidity, existential anguish, the will to fight back, irony, and diversely committed types of sense of humor.

With respect to style and genre, our seven films can be ranked as drama, psychological drama, metaphysical cinema, comedy, black comedy... On more than one occasion, they contain a perceptibly 'here-and-now' documentary streak; in other cases, they seem to play 'somewhere in the age of financial capitalism', yearning for a more archetypal dimension. In yet other instances, a directly universalizing thrust is obvious. But the two opposite strivings coexist and are not mutually exclusive. What we never find in these films, in contrast, is an interest in things such as surface-level violence, vampirism, or other high-profile horrors. The vampirism of today's capitalism is horror enough for their directors. The *invisible*, *hidden* violence of our system is more real, to them, than the representation of any mystificatory, obfuscatory, escapist visible one.<sup>19</sup>

I would therefore venture to conclude the present survey of what seem to me to be the most important recent Italian films on this topic by arguing that, while their extremely diverse richness from the formal and existential viewpoint does not allow for their (unsystemic) commonalities to be captured by any specific formula – their utter diversity probably being one of their strongest assets – they do at least share one broad general attitude toward their public: *they all refuse to manipulate it by exploitative narrative strategies*. (For the present purposes I classify as 'exploitative' a film that both oversimplifies, or dumbs down, and spectacularizes any given issue, generally for commercial, box-office purposes.)

In treating the members of their public as adults – which is by no means synonymous with boring them! – by their very complexity, these seven films in different ways all put in place an *honest and intelligent mimesis* of the world that surrounds us and thus fulfil what can be argued to be *the* essential requirement of a solid realism. Yes, here realism comes in many different shapes and shades; as, in the past, did the realism of the great masters of Italian cinema, from De Sica to Monicelli and from Visconti to Wertmüller. But, having mentioned this issue, I realize that discussing any category of film, as Millicent Marcus has put it so sharply, ‘in the light of realism, let alone discussing realism per se, would require an entirely independent treatment; and so I will at this point gladly defer any such critical endeavor to a future (realistic? visionary?) ‘fable for another time’.<sup>20</sup>

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## Notes

1.

E questi precari di che cosa si lamentano? Finalmente non devono più timbrare il cartellino tutti i giorni, come nelle burocrazie sovietiche. Possono lavorare due mesi e programmare una vacanza, e poi tornano a fare un altro lavoro. Io nella mia vita ho fatto tanti lavori, anzi sono stato il primo precario di tutti . . . e sono arrivato alla conclusione che contro di me è stata organizzata una campagna mediatica di odio e di invidia.

(Stefano Obino [a collective pseudonym], *Il Vangelo secondo Precario. Storie di ordinaria flessibilità*, 2005, an Oltremedia production by the Circolo Arci ‘I Mostri’ di via Bellezza, Milano)

In this film (on which more in Note 8), Berlusconi appears in a background news report, making the above-quoted public statement of opinion about the precariat. I have not been able to date this particular wording, which could simply be a condensed collage of his innumerable well-known, and well-publicized, off-the-cuff outpourings on the matter. Berlusconi’s voice is dubbed by Nando Dalla Chiesa.

2. On *Signorinaeffe*, see Testa (2012: 343–354).

3. Trade and financial imbalances: so much so, that economists have written about *twin crises*. See, in the widely available literature, the effective presentations in Bellamy Foster and Magdoff (2009) and Roncaglia (2010). On the growing inequality in the ‘formerly industrialized’ West, the most recent useful update is to be found in the inset to *The Economist* (2012).

4. The all-time classic on capitalist collapses is, of course, Kindleberger (1989); but each such downturn has ever had specific features, and ours is probably best captured in Panara (2010). For a further bibliography on the economic aspect of the issue, see Testa (2013: 318–348).

5. On the precariat in socio-political terms, the amplest and most useful recent contribution is offered by Standing (2011), to be compared and contrasted with the possibly too upbeat essay by Gaggi and Narduzzi (2007).

6. 'Crisi: peggioramento, scompenso, accesso, parossismo, modificazione, perturbazione, difficoltà, dissesto, recessione, depressione, rovina, squilibrio, turbamento, smarrimento, inquietudine, *scon-cer-to*!' This baroque string is presented to us in the film courtesy of the journalists who interview the MP Michele Apicella from the PCI, the Communist Party. Today the joke is on all Italians, and it can no longer be perceived as funny. The word is, indeed, especially ominous in the book devoted to it by Tremonti (2008), where the dismal failure of free market policies, deregulation, federalism and private enterprise is described as curable by applying to the sick global body a treatment of *more* free market policies, deregulation, federalism and private enterprise.
7. For fuller references, see the copious data and insightful discussions provided by Chirumbolo in his two contributions (2007–2008, 2012).
8. *Il Vangelo secondo Precario* (*The Gospel According to Precario*), cited in the epigraph to this article, is not excluded because of any lack of merit – it is a fast-moving, creative, well-written and well-acted film that has compelling stories to tell, and thus huge amounts to say, about temp workers – but simply because it would deserve a full treatment on its own. It is a fairly surrealistic 'porte-manteau' film, characterized by a special type of directorship (multiple authorship), distribution (ARCI-CGIL), narrative structure (multiple-episode) and style (surreal/grotesque), and hence is in most respects too heterogeneous to be woven into the same discourse with its counterparts targeted for the regular film market. In narratological terms, it could be described as a perfect example of the attainment of *substantive realism via a formally non-mimetic path*: stuff, in other words, for further development in a specifically theoretical context. In a symbiosis with this film that should be better explored, the Italian independent daily *Il Fatto Quotidiano* has for a few years been running a «San Precario» blog at the following web address: [www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/blog/sprecario/](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/blog/sprecario/).
9. In this particular case future viewers of these films will be taken aback to see that in the early 2000s a by then long-vanished country called Italy failed in its transition to a knowledge-based society by proving unable to muster the resources necessary to support university teaching.
10. In other words, Matteo has been hired by his employer (as have most of his fellow workers) under either a CO.CO.CO contract (*Contratto di Collaborazione Coordinata e Continuativa*) or an even more recently devised (one assumes, *uncoordinated* as well as *non-continuous*) project-based CO.CO.PRO (*Contratto di Collaborazione a Progetto*). On the subject of volunteer (i.e. as a rule unpaid, or only nominally paid) teaching at Italian universities, it was just that phenomenon which gave rise to the noun 'precario' (meaning 'contract teacher') in the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, the term has been in existence for about half a century, albeit with a narrower applicability at that time than global phenomena have recently given it. Its (eloquent) origin is from *L. prex, precis*, 'prayer'.
11. Here too, the future viewers of *1,000 Euros* and *Break Free* will probably be curious to explore the circumstances in which the Italian State of the early 2000s determined the preservation of the national wealth accumulated over centuries in the form of art treasures to be outside its own remit, turning it over instead to the hypothetical tender mercies of the empty-nested leisured classes.
12. Anyway the film never says how and why a chemical plant came to be located deep in the interior of the Abruzzo (or is that detail itself part of the fiction?). For comparison, it is only very recently that the Italian public has slowly begun to discover the multi-layered history which, half a century ago, led to the development of the large ILVA steel mill in the much more easily accessible Ionian port of Taranto.



13.

Ai vecchi non dare un c\*\*\*, a quelli che hanno un anno o due per la pensione dà il meno possibile, ai giovani li fai salire su un pullman e li butti giù da un burrone. Oppure: scrivania nel sottoscala, incarichi di lavoro assurdi, segretarie che quando ti vedono ti sputano, dopo una settimana accettano cantando.

Who has never heard about such situations *occurring*? What is especially revealing here is to see them *theorized and planned*.

14. To look at the facts:

China has not officially published a Gini coefficient since 2000, but a study by the China Development Research Foundation suggests that it has surged from less than 0.3 in 1978 to more than 0.48 [on a scale from 0 to 1]. In little more than a generation, Mao's egalitarian dystopia has become a country with an income distribution more skewed than America's.

(*The Economist*, 2012: 16)

15. His unhappiness extends to his moneyed but decerebrated kin. His daughter, for example, locked in an 'Oedipal tussle' with her mother, pines for a truly surgical solution to her insecurity by receiving, as a gift for one of her birthdays, a size-4 breast enlargement.

16. In what strikes as a strong allegorical allusion, *maladroite Sonia* shows an initial interest for Giorgio. A lumbering elective affinity of sorts seems first to link, and then separate, the film's working class and labor unions...

17. But we do have a hopeful premonition: impelled by the shock, on the day of the murder most of the workers go out together for a pizza, and so start some kind of forward-looking dialogue among themselves. However small, this is a great improvement over their previous monadic ways. On the other hand, Sonia, having seen her allegorical 'romance with the labor unions' fail dismally, finally takes to working as an escort in order to make money: a lot more money than before, with a lot less exertion. This might be Virzi's alternate, slightly unnerving figuration of what he believes to be in store for the Italian working class. (For the record, *Sonia Marmeladova* is the archetypal saintly prostitute in Dostoevskii's *Crime and Punishment*).

18. Besides, Daniela, though no longer a naïve adolescent, acts in revenge for having been essentially *seduced and abandoned*, a theme not exactly unknown to the classic age of Italian cinematic comedy.

19. The now 'classic' argument about the present economic system's invisible violence is to be found in Žižek (2008).

20. The allusion is to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's (entirely unrealistic) *Féerie pour une autre fois* (1952).

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## Appendix

Below are set out, from the actual scripts of the films here examined, a few among the lines most relevant to the labor market and employment in general. The translations are mine.

### Mobbing

The labor union officer:

'People are fragile things, they break easily . . . Violence doesn't just occur when you are attacked physically, all they need to do is to stop you from doing anything. That's how they can take away your self-respect, from each of you.' ('Le persone sono cose fragili, si rompono facilmente . . . La violenza non è aggredirvi fisicamente, basta non farvi fare nulla. Così vi possono strappare la dignità, a ciascuno di voi.')

### Break Free

'Cenzo to his son Vince:

'I was never ashamed of my father. Never.' ('Io non mi sono mai vergognato di lui. Mai.')

### I Only Wanted to Sleep On Top of Her

Marco Pressi:

'We are all numbers . . . ' ('Siamo tutti numeri . . .')

'We are all "precarious" today!' ('Siamo tutti "precari" oggi!')

### *The Missing Star*

Liu Hua:

‘Sugar cane is never sweet at both ends.’ (‘La canna da zucchero non è mai dolce da tutte le due parti.’ [sic])

Vincenzo Buonavolontà:

‘[In Italy] I’d like to have fewer profiteers, braggards, scoundrels, and a little more respect.’ (‘[In Italia] vorrei un po’ meno profittatori, arroganti, cialtroni, un po’ più di rispetto.’)

### *Days and Clouds*

Michele:

‘Maybe with earplugs we’ll be able to pull through.’ (‘Forse con i tappi ce la faremo.’)

### *A Whole Life Ahead*

Marta:

‘For some of us anyway this s\*\*\* job is the only chance!’ (‘Per alcune di noi comunque questo lavoro di m\*\*\*\* è l’unica possibilità!’)

### *The 1000 Euro Generation*

Matteo:

‘My name is Matteo Moretti, and I am a commonplace . . . I work in a firm that I don’t like and that doesn’t like me.’ (‘Il mio nome è Matteo Moretti, e sono un luogo comune . . . Lavoro in un’azienda che non mi piace, e a cui non piaccio io.’)

(Proving a mathematical theorem during class) ‘Therefore . . . the most improbable things *must* happen.’ (‘Dunque . . . le cose più improbabili *devono* succedere.’)

(Ditto) ‘Therefore . . . there exist questions to which we can *only* give *wrong* answers.’ (‘Dunque . . . esistono domande a cui si possono dare *soltanto* risposte sbagliate.’)

‘I like mathematical formulas: something is either true or not true, it’s exactly the opposite of marketing.’ (‘A me piacciono le formule matematiche: una cosa è vera oppure no, è l’esatto opposto del marketing.’)

(Opening the flat’s ransacked communal fridge) ‘First you open the fridge and *then* you persuade yourself that whatever you find in it is exactly what you were craving for.’ (‘Prima apri il frigo, e poi ti convinci che quello che c’è dentro è esattamente quello di cui avevi voglia.’)

Angelica from Marketing:

‘We come up with the lies, all you have to do is make sure that they seem true.’ (‘Noi diciamo le bugie, tu devi solo pensare a farle sembrare vere.’)

Francesco:

‘This is the first epoch in the history of humanity when there are people who [fail in Milan and] go back to Molise!’ (‘Questa è la prima epoca nella storia dell’umanità in cui c’è gente che [fallisce a Milano e] torna in Molise!’)

‘Matteo, you’re in a full-fledged sentimental comedy!’ (‘Matteo, sei in piena commedia sentimentale!’)

Beatrice:

‘Do you know what is the symptom of a society in crisis? Nostalgia!’ (‘Lo sai qual è il sintomo di una società in crisi? La nostalgia!’)