

Watching Italians Turn Around: Gender, Looking, and Roman/Cinematic Modernity¹

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Abstract

This essay focuses on Alberto Lattuada's short film "Gli italiani si voltano," an episode in the film anthology *L'amore in città* (*Love in the City*, 1953), as a key text for understanding what is at stake in looking at the city—in particular the city of Rome—in postwar Italian filmmaking. The chapter argues that the weight of looking and the attempt to see anew are both structured as much by what we see in the image as by absences that are the inheritance from Fascist interventions in the urban fabric. The chapter concludes by suggesting some of the ways in which practices of looking and seeing in postwar Italian cinema must contend with the invisible presence of the past.

Keywords

Neorealism, Rome, vision, looking, gender, modernity, postwar cinema, urbanism, city and cinema

quasi tutto il neo-realismo italiano del decennio '45-'55 potrebbe formare un lungo unico film intitolato Roma e in questo senso è anche prezioso l'apporto di non poche opere altrimenti secondarie. Un elenco coinciderebbe con un intero capitolo della storia del cinema.

Italo Insolera (1993, 178)

. . . almost all Italian neorealist cinema from the decade 1945-1955 could be understood to make up a long film entitled *Rome*, with even minor works making their precious contributions. A list of them would coincide with an entire chapter of film history.

This is an essay that is largely about a single film, a short film, less than fifteen minutes in length, and moreover, a short film that was not intended to stand on its own, but that, rather, was a contribution to an omnibus film. However, I understand this film as an exemplary text that has much to teach us about the experience of Roman, and more broadly, Italian modernity, and about the stakes of looking, in both Fascist and

neorealist visual culture. Despite its seemingly minor status, this film offers fertile terrain for the exploration of the historical contingencies and overdeterminations of what I take to be a shared condition of ambiguous modernity that is embodied by both the city of Rome and by neorealism, the film movement that largely was theorized and took shape inside this city. I want to explore this nexus of issues by looking closely at a film that is about looking—whether glancingly or staringly. The film in question is Alberto Lattuada's "Gli italiani si voltano" (literally, "Italians turn around"), the final episode of *L'amore in città* (*Love in the City*, 1953), the omnibus film organized by Cesare Zavattini, the foremost theorist-practitioner of Italian neorealism. A consideration of this work, with frequent references and comparisons to other cinematic works from the same period, will, I hope, broaden and enrich an understanding of what makes the modernity and the modernism of both Rome and neorealism so uniquely compelling. I hope this essay will contribute to both historical and theoretical understandings of Italian cinematic modernity and, more broadly, of the visual culture of modern Italy.

Rome's awkward modernity

Rome's centrality to Italian historical, cultural, and political life is both responsible for and analogous to Rome's ubiquitous representation in Italian cinema. Modern Italy as nation state is itself a fairly recent invention that dates only to 1861. Rome did not become the capital of unified Italy until 1871. Up until the 1870s Rome was a malarial backwater, a papal, ecclesiastical capital, but by no means a world city. Central Rome's population was a mere 200,000 (Insolera 1993, 3-9; Vidotto 2001, 3-32). However, the Vatican authority's international purview combined with religious pilgrimages to the city meant that, despite its provincialism, the city was always, to some degree, international in flavor. In addition, aristocratic Anglo-Saxon "grand tour"-ism, which flourished from the late seventeenth until the mid-nineteenth century, brought to Rome other visitors, those whose desacralized piety was reserved for Rome's artistic and architectural riches (or ruins). Although "grand tourism" was itself a sign of a nascent cultural modernity, with its mobility and its predication on large sums of privately accumulated capital, this tourism directed itself at Rome precisely because the city was not modern. In becoming

modern, however, Rome ran the risk of undoing its tourist charm. Augustus Hare, author of *Walks in Rome*, the guidebook preferred by polite nineteenth-century English tourists, writes witheringly of the postunification architecture that had been thrown up across the city. The Esquiline, the area of Rome that roughly covers the area that lies between San Giovanni Laterano to the south, Santa Maria Maggiore to the north, Termini Station to the east, and San Pietro in Vincoli to the west, had been, right up until unification, largely undeveloped—a landscape of ancient Roman ruins, medieval basilicas, and vineyards. Hare imparts to the reader of the 1893 (thirteenth) edition of his book, “The Esquiline is being rapidly covered with ill-constructed buildings of the most pitiful and mean character. Its interest may be considered to be a thing of the past” (33). While Hare’s disdain could be discounted as the attitude of the aesthete who has failed to reckon with the fact that all cities are changing all the time, there is something of interest in his peevish attitude toward modern Rome insofar as it suggests that the forces that would make Rome modern would make Rome inhospitable to looking. (We might note, in passing, that the thirteenth edition appears just on the cusp of cinema’s own appearance on the world stage.)

Rome’s cinematic representations interestingly archive, reflect, but also reconfigure, the materiality of Rome’s modernity. Of course, the cinematic representation of any city will necessarily be engaged in some process of archivization, deformation, and abstraction of the city itself. The simple fact of this happening is not, in and of itself, remarkable, though the ways in which the process takes shape will also be interesting: how this particular part of the city was recorded—however contingently or purposefully—and at what precise moment and in what way, and so forth. Rome’s appeal to cinema, however, has never been straightforward. Marco Bertozzi (2001, 15) explains that in the archives of the Lumière brothers’ actuality films, Rome is “under-represented,” despite the fact that Rome had been a popular subject in eighteenth-century print culture and the nineteenth-century panorama. As a cinematic city, however, Rome offered little in the way of the crowd scenes of urban life that seemed to be the perfect subject of cinema’s vivid representational capacities (16). What Rome

offered to the chronicle of urban modernity and the culture of cinematic modernism and its uses of the city was distinctly different from what other European cities offered, or were made to offer, by modernist filmmakers. Walter Ruttmann's Berlin in *Berlin, die Sinfonie der Grossstadt (Berlin: Symphony of a City, 1927)*, or René Clair's Paris in *Paris qui dort (The Crazy Ray, 1924)*, embodied an urban modernity more fully in tune with standard accounts of what made the urban distinctively modern: technological development, speed, crowds, the evanescent temporality of the fleeting encounter. Such an account of the city's modernity is most famously and powerfully found in the work of Walter Benjamin (1997), particularly in his reading of Charles Baudelaire's responses to Parisian modernity. Rome's urban modernity was slower, less crowded, more stolid, constituted by yawning expanses or enervated space. And yet we need to see all these features as somehow just as modern as the thrilling textures of urban life in Paris and Berlin.

While early cinema itself was, of course, intensely modern, there remained something atavistic and clumsy about its modernity. Early cinema's head-on stare, or its rigid panoramic mobility express the way in which elements of cultural modernity seem to arrive in advance of themselves. Cinema's technology is fundamentally modern, and yet its relatively limited range of expressive gestures makes it a somewhat backwards cousin to the fluid achievements of modern literature, painting, and music. In this sense, the modernity of early cinema consists in the way that traces of the unmodern or antimodern are suspended within it. The same is true of modern Rome. The clumsiness of early cinema's panoramic shot, in its attempt to embrace indexically the entirety of a profilmic array—just because it more or less can do so—is something like the awkward overdetermination of a modern Roman urban intervention like Piazza Vittorio Emanuele. This enormous piazza and its surrounding buildings self-consciously imitate Turin's large arcaded boulevards and the huge scale of that city's piazzas, which were less meeting places for citizens than thoroughfares for horse and carriage traffic. The references to Turinese architecture and city planning are intended to acknowledge and celebrate the importation of Vittorio Emanuele II, head of the House of Savoy—whose seat was

Turin—into Rome, where he became the first monarch of unified Italy. This piazza and the buildings surrounding it are in the Esquiline and surely would have been on Hare's mind when he warned visitors off this part of town. In the instance of Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, modern Rome isn't even Roman, strictly speaking.²

The piazza's hypertrophy metonymizes what would become modern Rome's tendency to outgrow its limits, to make itself gigantic. Becoming too big becomes a challenge not just to one's refined taste, but also to being pictured at all. Pasolini made Rome's unrepresentable immensity a key feature of his grappling with the city as representational object (Rhodes 2007). Modern Rome's tendency toward unplanned, chaotic expansion was both the effect of insufficient governmental oversight and control and a result of the city's ambiguous modernity. Rome was never an industrial center; its population swelled as a result of the influx of migrants from other areas of a newly unified Italy, who were attracted to the city's economic growth that resulted from its creation as capital of unified Italy. One of the chief beneficiaries of this growth was the construction industry: modern Rome—Roma capitale—needed new administrative buildings by the score, but it also needed housing for the administrative labor force working in these buildings. The boom in construction attracted laborers to the city who could easily be inserted into the Roman building trade's relatively unskilled (and nonindustrialized) labor force. In fact, the rapid growth of the construction industry was, at various points in the twentieth century, encouraged by the state, precisely because the methods predominant in the industry meant that it could quickly absorb relatively unskilled laborers. Of course, those migrants who came to Rome would themselves need housing, and so the favoring of the construction industry was hardly a solution, in the short term, to Rome's problems. What is worth noting here is that Rome's economic and population growth were predicated on a set of circumstances (the simple need for housing and the simple methods employed by the Roman building trade) that were themselves not terribly modern (Rhodes 2007, 11-13). Rome's modernity is often compelling in the way in which it is never quite modern.

Probably all modernities are belated or incomplete or defensively overdetermined. Attempts to advertise a city's modernity run the risk of advertising the anxiety that one is not so modern after all. This anxiety or tension is visible in the most celebrated period in Italian film history: that of immediate postwar realism. On the one hand, this cinema intends itself as absolutely new, an inaugural movement that effects a radical break with the past—a mode of filmmaking singular in its documentary abruptness, its jarring elisions, and its antiteleological narratives. On the other hand, its newness is made visible as a return to something old—a realist mode, with its typology of characters, its recognizable representation of a world, its summoning of a popular body. Modern Italian culture could be said to have often appealed to the new via the old: from Fascism's marriage of classicism to modernism in the architecture of the EUR section of Rome, to neorealism itself, to Pasolini's belief in the self-evident radical alterity of the ancient and the primitive. Of course, these appeals to the past should not be collapsed together. The Fascist invocation of the classical past was meant to create an image of Italian culture as a seamless totality, whereas Pasolini's interest in the past as counterimage of the present was intended to disrupt such seamlessness. In both cases, however, pastness and the ability to present it as something one can see—whether in the ruins of the Coliseum or the ruined teeth of a subproletariat *borgataro*—are significantly at stake.

The ambiguity of Roman modernity and the ambiguous status of aesthetic modernism inside modern Italian culture both seem to me to be things that haunt Italian cinema during the period of neorealism (and after). Rome's awkward modernity and neorealism's desire to be new while also appealing to the old constitute an interestingly conflicted ground for Italian film culture's march into the second half of the twentieth century (see Trentin 2013b).

Looking (for love) in the neorealist city

L'amore in città was both an apotheosis of and a sort of curtain call for neorealism. By the time of its release, films such as Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951) had already appeared. *Bellissima* exhibited a neorealist milieu (working-class Rome) and an emphasis on everyday life, and foregrounded its casting of nonprofessionals alongside

seasoned actors such as Anna Magnani, who were already living advertisements for neorealist cinema. Despite what was by 1951 a near-canonical assemblage of neorealist tropes, *Bellissima* also performed a (perhaps peremptory and precipitous) valediction to neorealism. Its storyline involved the attempt of Maddalena to get her somewhat plain daughter into the movies. Its setting at Cinecittà makes of it a reflexive satire of the movie business—including the business of making neorealist films. At one point Maddalena encounters a woman working in the studios as an editor. Maddalena recognizes her from Renato Castellani's *Sotto il sole di Roma* (1948)—a neorealist film in which the actress, Liliana Mancini, playing the film editor, actually appeared. In an exchange that punctures not just the surface of the diegesis, but also the myths of neorealist culture, Maddalena asks her how it is she is editing film and not acting in front of the camera. Mancini replies, "I'm not an actress. They only hired me once or twice because I was the type they needed. . . . So many people ended up badly, thinking they'd make it in cinema." In addition to the demystification of the myths of neorealism, the same period in which *Bellissima* and *L'amore in città* were released also saw the flourishing of a subgenre of neorealism (if that is even the right term, given that neorealism itself does not qualify as a genre) called "rosy" or "pink" neorealism (*neorealismo rosa*), in which some of the tropes of neorealism were deployed inside movies with fundamentally comic plots and uplifting narrative denouements.

Thus, *L'amore in città* would seem to be a belated arrival, despite the fact that it offers some of the most radical experiments in neorealist filmmaking. The filmmakers who contributed to the film were Dino Risi, Michelangelo Antonioni, Carlo Lizzani, Federico Fellini, Francesco Maselli, Zavattini (in collaboration), and Lattuada. The film's credits propose it as a kind of newspaper or journal: "*Lo spettatore: rivista cinematografica, Anno 1953, N. 1.*" The same credit title also tells us that this publication is directed by Zavattini, Riccardo Ghione, and Marco Ferreri. (A *direttore* is an editor—in this case of a journal—as opposed to a *regista* or film director.) The pretense toward journalism corresponds to Zavattini's (1966, 255) belief that cinema ought to draw its plots from everyday life. "Every moment is infinitely rich. . . . Excavate, and

every little fact is revealed as a mine." Drawing from the sources of actuality—those events, people, and places already given by the world—would, Zavattini seemed to hope, guarantee a proper ethical relation to contemporary experience by merely testifying to the existence of such events, people, and places. Aesthetically, these "found" subjects, it was hoped, would produce a de-dramatization—or de-melodramatization—in which the tiniest narrative subject might be allowed (or be forced) to exhaust itself, or else used to reveal how intensely dramatic any apparently banal event might be when looked at with radical attentiveness. Oddly enough, Maselli's and Zavattini's contribution to *L'amore in città*, "Storia di Caterina"—about a poor mother who abandons her child at an orphanage, only to be prosecuted and then pardoned for this crime—is entirely plausible as a newspaper item, but it is also one of the most melodramatically sentimental of the short films. Antonioni's "Tentato suicidio" treats material that is equally melodramatic, but the director engages it with a cool, documentary matter-of-factness that translates the material into a different register altogether. Antonioni's subjects—all women who have tried to kill themselves—play themselves in minidramatizations of the events leading up to their near deaths. From inside each autobiographical diegesis, these subjects-cum-actors move between playing themselves at a historically anterior moment to addressing the camera from the present moment. In one startling passage, a woman (playing herself) picks up a razor blade as if to cut her wrists, only to hold up her wrist to the camera to reveal the scars from her actual failed attempt. The film's conceit is simple, but produces a collapse between past and present and between presentation and representation (see Margulies 2003).

Alberto Lattuada's contribution, "Gli italiani si voltano," is a strangely incongruous coda to *L'amore in città*. The film is a kind of "city symphony," insofar as it follows the course of a day in the life of Rome via the movements of a variety of protagonists, all of them women, most of them in entirely nonspeaking roles. The film begins as we see women first waking up, then traveling into the city center by various means, next occupying themselves in various ways throughout the city, but always moving: down sidewalks, across piazzas, and in buses. Moreover, the film emphasizes its emplacement

in various parts of Rome. The film carefully indicates that we move from the periphery to the center and back to the periphery across our day. The spectator would be forgiven, however, if these aspects of the film—its “city symphony”-like conceit or its discreet but carefully plotted logics of place—escape notice, initially. For the most obvious thing about the film is that it forces us to look—really to stare—at women’s bodies as they navigate the variety of Rome’s urban spaces. Despite the fact that none of the women is unclothed, the film is nearly pornographic, or at the very least, perverse, in its obsessive interest in these women’s bodies, which are frequently reduced, via eroticized metonymic framing, to part objects: a pair of breasts, a derriere, a pair of ankles. Depending on the spectator’s attitude to the film—as well as his or her gender, sexual orientation, and so on—the film is either hilarious or terrifying—or perhaps both. The film enacts voyeurism by abstracting the female body as an object of vision, but also puts voyeurism itself on display (and, to some extent, under critique) by giving us sequences in which we see men seeing (women).

There are moments, as well, that are intensely creepy: for instance, when an overweight man pursues, with sudurous ardor, a younger woman up the Spanish Steps. Upon arrival at the top, the woman is met by her lover, and thus the man in pursuit is left to mop his sweaty face in frustrated exasperation. While that sequence pivots from implied near tragedy or conflict back to the film’s general farcical-whimsical tone, the film’s closing, and most excruciating sequence, brings us ever closer to tragedy and potential sexual predation. At the beginning of this sequence, a young woman boards a crowded bus in the piazza in front of Stazione Trastevere. A middle-aged man begins ogling and attempting to fondle her, forcing her to move about the bus in an attempt to protect herself. The bus grows emptier as it moves farther into the periphery (the increasingly sparse but also industrialized landscape we see moving past us through the bus windows). Eventually the bus reaches its terminus, at which point the young woman and the man both exit. We are in Piazza Meucci, which at that time was a desolate square, more building site than neighborhood. The young woman hurries to her building, which sits alone, with half-completed construction nearby; reaches her door; and

disappears into safety just as the man nearly manages to stop her. This final sequence seems to put the film's own techniques and obsessions on trial: its exaggerated interest in women's bodies, which, had seemed like harmless fun, assumes a more threatening aspect in the film's last disquieting moments. Thus, while "Gli italiani si voltano" amuses and titillates, like all of the other films in *L'amore in città*, it does engage the abrasions of contemporary Italian (Roman) urban experience and communicates the operative tensions that I have begun to elaborate as peculiar to the Roman experience of modernity.

The film's title, which I have held off parsing until now, is informatively polysemic. The conjunction of the masculine plural article, "gli" (the) and the plural noun, "italiani" (Italians), with its masculine ending can be read as referring either to all Italians (and thus even to all of Italy itself) or, if we read it literally, only to Italian men. The double valence of the film's title creates a series of displacements and figurative substitutions. The metaphor of "turning around" (*voltarsi*), when taken seriously, signifies that women's bodies become the metonymic site through which an Italian "turnaround"—a nascent economic and cultural recovery—is enacted and made visible. The use of "turning around" to mean both looking/staring and economic renewal interestingly rehearses the terms of neorealism. "Turning around," turning around to look, or even to stare, could be used to designate the work of neorealist filmmaking itself, tout court. Zavattini remarks on neorealist cinema's "overwhelming desire to see" as its chief defining characteristic (1966, 218). Karl Schoonover (2012, 151) has recently written that

neorealist films do not undertake their political work simply by equating the image with truth. They also align truth with the act of seeing; that is, the content of the image is not the exclusive measure of realism. For these films, realism is as much about seeing as it is about the sights. The content of the image often provides an opportunity to showcase vision as the only activity able to render reality. We might say that

the typical neorealist image consists of content through which the film can overtly recast the act of seeing, shatter habituated perceptions, and elaborate the agency granted just by watching.

Schoonover is chiefly interested in neorealism's privileging of the sight of the injured, damaged, traumatized, or deceased body. But the sense of danger that percolates through "Gli italiani si voltano"'s images of looking as predation certainly makes the film ripe for analysis in Schoonover's compelling terms. The film's use of "turning around" to name both fleeting, contingent encounters and longer, sustained (predatory) practices of staring and observation neatly captures neorealism's dual intention to capture the evanescence of events in time and to record through sustained attention the entirety of carefully chosen acts and processes (even or especially when these acts and processes are merely the stuff of everyday life). In these terms—the terms provided by the film's title—"Gli italiani si voltano" inscribes itself into the canon of neorealism despite the fact that its tone and jokiness might seem to have alienated it from the company of more famous and more serious examples of neorealist filmmaking.

However, what interests me here, and what will preoccupy me for the remainder of this article, is the fact that, because we follow these women across Rome, the city itself, like the women's bodies, becomes the metonym through which we begin to grasp something of Italian postwar recovery, and thus of the longer history of Italy's and Rome's (or Italy's via Rome's) modernity. Signs of life in Italy's economic life at the time of the film's making were due in no small part to US Marshall Plan aid. But the film also seems proleptically to suggest the rhythms of life as they would be transformed during the height of Italy's Economic Miracle (from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s) which itself was, of course, stimulated by the Marshall Plan. Just as the women's clothing styles (which effectively shape their bodies into historically new forms such as the Dior "new look") index a historically contingent process of modernization, so too do the places that see them indexed. Just as I have been at pains to demonstrate the necessity of reading the film's title literally to refer to the activity of men staring, so as to understand the role

that looking played in the process of Italian and Roman modernization, so too would I like to insist on a literality of place. In other words, I would like, in the section that follows, to read some of the film's spaces in order to uncover a kind of implicit and even explicit discourse on Roman urban modernity. In other words, what I propose to do is to take the film's cue in looking a little too hard at the fleetingly contingent details that the film offers of Rome's cityscape.

Seeing what is and is not there

An Italy that "turns around" actually pivots and is predicated on the violent disruptive processes of Roman urban modernization that were pursued in the postunification and the Fascist periods that displaced certain (classed) bodies from the center to the periphery. Both center and periphery are necessary to the demonstration of this turnaround—to neorealism's turn to look at these spaces and places. If we read "Gli italiani si voltano" in an authorial, intentionalist framework, then we would be obliged to consider Alberto Lattuada's important contribution to the history of photography and to the prehistory of neorealist film culture—his volume of photographs published under the title *L'occhio quadrato (The Squared [or Framed] Eye)* in 1941. The photographs, all of which were produced in a 6cm x 6cm format, hence the name of the title, bespeak an urban picturesque. Lattuada's (1982, 15) preface to the volume catalogues its various subjects: "pavements of quiet little piazzas, houses both inhabited and abandoned, old walls, little urban hills suffocated by stones, men in the street, men at work, men made still listening to poetry, defeated men. . . ." The book's emphasis on the everyday might have been read as a valorization of the humility of Italian life, but it fell foul of official Fascist aesthetic judgment, which faulted it for emphasizing squalor and ignoring the signs of Fascist progress—especially Fascist urban progress. A disgruntled reviewer in *Cinema*, a film journal edited by Vittorio Mussolini, Benito's son, wrote (in an apostrophizing direct address to Lattuada), "While we are building E'42 [also known as EUR--Esposizione Universale Romana--intended to be the World's Fair exhibit to take place in Rome in 1942, but interrupted by World War II] and urban

renovations, you look around and see only rags and poor people?" (quoted in Cosulich 1985, 23).

Lattuada's apparent preference for the picturesquely down-at-the-heels is here read as a thinly cloaked criticism of the Fascist regime and its emphasis on progress. Interestingly, Lattuada's "Gli italiani si voltano" begins and ends with a visual vocabulary that extends directly out of the picturesqueness of *L'occhio quadrato*, but, as I want to explore now, it also captures and makes use of the same urban renewal projects that Lattuada was accused of ignoring in his photographs. The film stages, in the way that almost any film might, especially one shot on location, a study in figure-ground relations. Clearly the figure—that of the women who ambulate across the city and the film's images—is what is meant to claim our attention. However, if we take the ogling men's activity as a kind of license and look too hard at the film itself, what we see is also the ground of the image, which is contemporary Rome, which, in the film's punning discourse on "turning around" as economic and cultural recovery, is exactly what we are meant to be seeing in the first place. What we see, then, are the spaces and places of 1950s Rome. Many of these spaces and places themselves are ancient, while others date from the period of Fascism. Still others are postwar inventions. Moreover, our ability to see them at all depends crucially at times on the Fascist interventions into Rome's urban fabric. The strange anachronisms that are captured and even staged by "Gli italiani si voltano" make of it an exemplary text on the subject of Roman (cinematic) modernity.

The film's opening shot would seem to be located somewhere in the countryside. We see what looks to be nothing more than a barn, out of which races a young girl, neatly dressed in skirt, blouse, and heels (not exactly a rural costume). She stops to take a drink of water from the spigot in the foreground. In a close-up of the spigot, we can descry, ever so blurrily, some sort of industrial chimney belching out black smoke in the furthest background: a city cannot be too far away. The next shot brings us into a more obviously urbanized location. A woman dressed in a tight short-sleeved sweater, mid-calf skirt, and heels walks with purpose toward the camera and pauses to wave back at someone just off screen, in one of the large, modern blocks of flats—five stories

high, with smooth plastered walls punctured regularly by neat rectangular windows and balconies—that dominate the shot. A street sign on the corner of a building nearest the camera tells us that this is the Via Isole Curzolane, a somewhat remote, suburban location in northeast Rome. The width of the streets indicates the newness of the area. The next shot is difficult to locate exactly, but presents us with an area of dense construction, a church steeple in the background (rather nineteenth-century gothic in appearance), and the threshold of an older (at the very least, pre-twentieth-century) building, out of which emerges a young woman, apparently immensely satisfied with the sunlight that strikes her face. The next shot shows two women in slacks gaily skipping down the staircase of an older, roughly plastered building. In the next, a woman in a sun dress climbs out of a sort of minibus in Piazza del Popolo, and finally, a low angle shot shows us an intensely stylish woman dressed in black slacks and a black blouse as she strides out of the revolving front door of the Hassler hotel at the top of the Spanish Steps. I want to pause here. In the space of about twenty seconds, across seven shots (there are two shots of the first girl emerging from the house in the countryside), we have moved from the relative obscurity of the periphery to iconic legibility of the center. Though we cannot tell just where we are in the first shot, the indications of the Via delle Isole Curzolane, the Piazza del Popolo, and the Hassler suggest—at least up until this point—a north-south itinerary.³ Significantly, we enter Rome proper via the Piazza del Popolo, the most monumental of entrances to the city.

Insert Figure 1

The rather irritating score that moves us and the images along with a brisk cheeriness might distract us from acknowledging the fact that Rome is being presented to us via a set of severely serial operations that will occur—with a highly patterned regularity—across a variety of locations, all of which place these woman in a variety of class positions. The work of these serial introductions (which introduce us to the work of the film itself) is to dissolve difference into a homogeneous medium of experience: everywhere across the city, attractive young women leave their homes to go into the city center. At the same time, the repetitiveness of the formula actually draws attention

to exactly what is different in each shot: the women's dress, the sorts of houses they are leaving. The seriality thus both represses and accentuates the differences among the women. Ultimately, what they share in common is an emergence into public space. This fact is underscored, a few seconds later, by the film's choosing to frame more tightly the emergence of each woman from private space. In medium shots, we see only the doorways out of whose shadows the women emerge. Then, in a sequence of no fewer than twelve medium close-ups and close-ups (mostly the latter), we see only their faces against the safe obscurity of their houses' interiors.

What seems to be at stake here is a difficult-to-decide relation between a kind of picturesque heterogeneity (of spaces, houses, urban life, and women's bodies) and a flattening of sameness that structures everyday life. The constructions that give shape to everyday life vary from place to place: from the blank, undistinguished modernist volumes of the buildings at the Via della Isole Curzolane, to the older, quainter elements of some of the other houses we see. In these opening moments the film makes visible a conflict between each shot's "realist" particularity and the abstract nature of the serial repetition itself. Moreover, Rome itself fits oddly in relation to this seriality. When the film brings us to Piazza del Popolo, the piazza—its historic architectural features, its recognizability—nearly threatens to destroy the sense of repetition that has so quickly become so regular. In this shot, of course, the woman emerges from a bus and not a house; the vehicle stands in for and supplants the traditional image of the house. Piazza del Popolo, however, is the threshold of Rome, and the image of a recognizable Rome that the piazza provides fills the cinematic image with signification that overflows the structural logic of the film's first seconds. The logic recommences, however, in the next shot, at the site of a threshold, that of the Hassler, that inserts Rome's specificity into a network of global tourist consumption—a practice and an industry that, thanks to the proliferation of transatlantic aviation, was rapidly expanding at exactly the moment of the film's production. Tourism is itself a serial practice that must divide its attention between the attractions of each individual destination and the serial exchange of one destination for another.⁴

As the film progresses, these same women—those to whom we have been introduced across the overture—are shown to be stared at and stalked by the men with whom they must share the streets of Rome. In this sense the film seems to play out all of the possibilities implied by Ruth Orkin's famous photograph, *American Girl in Italy* (1951). The film is clearly referenced by Mario de Biasi's 1954 photograph, which takes its title, "Gli italiani si voltano," from the film's, and in which we see a woman dressed in white as she seems about to walk directly into a phalanx of staring men on a street in Milan.

Whereas the film insists on women having to emerge from privacy into public space, men seem already to be there, outside, ready to haunt, threaten, and annoy these women. And this is when the film becomes immensely interesting. As I have already described, the film consists of numerous sequences in which a woman walking is followed by a man.⁵ Men follow women with their eyes, with their feet, and in cars. In one of the earliest sequences of this visual-spatial stalking, we see a woman walking down what we discover is the Via del Corso. The camera captures her movement—in profile, screen right to screen left—via a medium close-up tracking shot. The tracking shots of this woman alternate with close-up shots of a man driving a car, looking just to the right of the camera (and not at the road in front of him). The effect of the editing suggests that she is the object of his gaze—a gaze that is dangerous in more ways than one. The soundtrack has by this point given itself over to the ridiculous repetitive twanging of a jew's harp, meant, apparently, to rhyme with the movement of her body and the trembling of her breasts as she walks. Eventually the man runs into the back of another car, while a last shot of the woman sees her continuing on her way, never once having returned the man's gaze.

At the very beginning of this sequence, the woman passes a portico that allows us to see deep into the urban space beyond. What we see is the ruin of the mausoleum of Caesar Augustus. The reason we can see this monument from the Via del Corso is due to the fact that this area of the city was subjected to the *sventramenti* of the 1920s and 1930s. (The fact that we are seeing the mausoleum in the background of this shot is also

exactly what lets us know that we are on the Via del Corso.) In order to isolate this classical Roman monument and to make space for a museum dedicated to the newly unearthed Ara Pacis, the entire neighborhood that pressed close around the mausoleum was cleared (see Trentin 2013a). A new piazza was created from this clearance—the Piazza Augusto Imperatore—and large office buildings with broad porticoes were built on three sides of the piazza (on the north, south, and east), while the structure housing the Ara Pacis was installed on the eastern, Tiber, side of the piazza. The *sventramenti* of this area, which began in 1934 and concluded in 1937, also destroyed a large auditorium that had been built on top of the ancient mausoleum. The human toll of these *sventramenti* is perhaps better measured in the numerous inhabitants of this area who were forced to relocate themselves in the Fascist *borgate* built in the 1920s and 1930s explicitly to rehouse Romans displaced by these interventions into Rome’s urban fabric. (See Insolera 1993, 127-42).⁶ Not only were citizens displaced to the city’s farthest edges, but there was also, as a result of these clearances, simply less human, civic, life being carried on in Rome’s center.

Insert Figure 2.

The neighbourhood that we see early on in “Gli italiani si voltano,” around the Via delle Isole Curzolane is Tufello, where one of the twelve major Fascist borgate was built. Although the buildings (mass, subsidized housing) we see in that shot were built in the immediate postwar period, the entire area of Tufello and adjacent Val Melaina is perhaps best known for the Fascist housing estates imposed on its landscape in the 1930s. Thus the process of urban restructuring that allows us to see the mausoleum in the background, beyond this woman’s jiggling breasts, is also the process that necessitated the construction of the neighborhood we saw only moments earlier. In a sense, in moving from periphery to center, from Tufello to the mausoleum of Augustus, we retrace the steps of displaced *borgatari*, who had to travel back into Rome from their enforced exile in Rome’s periphery.

As we follow this woman—or rather as we follow this man following this woman, or follow this woman through the camera’s virtual and virtuosic performance of the man

following her—and as we gaze through newly created voids and onto newly “liberated” ancient monuments, we participate in a bizarrely complex dialectic of modern vision and visual pleasure. The tracking shots of the woman walking pretend to be taken from the car in which we see the man looking. The moving shots of both of them avail themselves of the Via del Corso’s axial availability to modern automobilized traffic. Here we have the intersection of film camera, automobile, human body, urban space, and civic architecture (both modern and ancient). The human body’s availability to the camera and the amenability of urban space to being traversed and photographed bespeak what Karen Pinkus (2003, 1) has termed the “cinematization of everyday life that took form in postwar Italy.” Pinkus’s exploration of the nature of Rome’s dizzying but always uneven modernization in the postwar period is concerned to track, through the unsolved mystery of Wilma Montesi’s murder, how “female mobility” and “the permeability of Italians before the camera” are key to understanding modern Rome’s particularity in the 1950s (4).⁷ Pinkus draws on the fact that both Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer describe the character of Italian life as “porous” so that she can name “a kind of natural photogenic ingenuousness” peculiar to Italians (4). This ingenuousness participates in both old and new. As Pinkus explains, paparazzi photographers (themselves an invention of this period) often took photographs *from* motor scooters looking *into* cars (3). The sequence I have been analyzing here participates in this economy of mobility and visibility. Being visible seems to depend on something distinctly unmodern—the innocent, somewhat primitively naive “ingenuousness” of the Italian subject—but also specifically modern: the modern city’s cleared spaces that allow for the mobility of vision itself as it travels toward the object of its interest.

The vulnerability of this woman to the predations of this man is, perhaps, analogous to the city’s vulnerability to the power that can reconfigure its spaces and the geographical coordinates of its citizens’ lives. In saying this I do not mean to equate the female body with landscape (though that is something the film hints at, perhaps), but rather I want to emphasize the fact that the film’s exhibition of women’s vulnerability to men in urban space (as well as their ingenuity in defending themselves against men in

urban space) narrates for us a specific mode of experiencing the modern city and its abrasions. The monuments of classical Rome were isolated so as to render them objects of sovereign vision, but also to make them available to a consolidation of nationalist ideology, via their consumption by Italians as images. These women's mobility, their confident navigation of Rome's urban space, and the modernity of their 1950s apparel, render them available to a newly emergent national imaginary that casts them as the very substance of Italy's "turnaround." And yet, our ability to see them move makes us uncomfortably complicit not only with a patriarchal regime of vision, but also with regimes of Fascist governmentality that reshaped Roman urban space in order to privilege the visibility of certain monuments while making relatively invisible, through acts of displacements, the bodies of Romans forced from the city center and into the borgate. Looking is the way into and out of this state of affairs. The valorization of vision is something shared by Fascist culture and neorealist culture alike. Vittorio Vidotto (2001, 201) has written that the Fascist interventions in Rome's spaces were undertaken to render the urban landscape as "backdrop," as "cinematic vision of reality," as a landscape "traversed by the look of someone in an automobile, who, like the eye of the film camera, is able to move rapidly down huge arteries of traffic." The object of this gaze, however, cannot but suffer. According to Vidotto's interpretation, the "denuded mausoleum [of Augustus], even given its imposing circularity, disappoints expectations" and appears merely a "rotting ruin." The concentration of vision is an uncertain practice, one that may double back on the seer's intentions and render a modernity that is somehow less than modern, and is rather, as Vidotto says of the area around the mausoleum, merely "incomplete" or "unresolved."

Earlier in my discussion of the first few shots of "Gli italiani si voltano" I paused: just at the moment at which the film seems fully to have made clear a trajectory of movement from periphery to center in its advertisement of our position in front of the Hassler hotel, at the top of the Spanish Steps. The shot that immediately follows reverses that trajectory, if only mildly: we see, in a medium shot, two women walking out of the vestibule-atrium of Luigi Moretti's *Il girasole* (sunflower) house on the Viale

Bruno Buoizzi in the Parioli district. Unlike the obviousness of the appearance of the Piazza del Popolo (instantly recognizable) or the Hassler (whose name we see above the door) in the two shots that immediately follow this one, there is subtlety to this glimpse of *Il girasole* and to its emplacement of the viewer. Two of the building's most remarkable features, its theatrically rough travertine blocks of rustication and its daringly suspended staircase, announce themselves, however fleetingly. It is too much to ask, perhaps, that the "average" spectator in 1953 might have registered this building and its location, and my point is not that she or he would have. (I myself was only alerted to the fact that this is what the film shows us by artist Jacopo Benci.) The film, however, does take the trouble to show us the building again, almost four minutes later, this time in the background of a wide travelling shot of an apparently deliriously happy young woman on a motor scooter, her billowing skirt revealing her legs up to mid-thigh.

Il girasole is famously complex. Above its rough-hewn travertine street-level base there seem to hang, suspended in air, projecting out over the sidewalk, two halves of a planar façade, much of it consisting of windows. The roofline of each half inclines up, thus creating the image of an enormous broken pediment crowning the building. But the two halves of the pediment (if we read the building in this way) are separated by a "deep vertical incision" (Rossi 2000, 166) that runs the entire height of the building's upper stories and dissolves into the atrium at street level.

In the two shots in which this building and the surrounding area appear, both monument and zone are clearly associated with an irrefutable postwar modernity, one that is initially much less ambiguous than that of the Piazza Augusto Imperatore. The newly minted buildings along the Viale Bruno Buoizzi seem metonymically to participate in the freedom of the young woman on the motor scooter. In a sense they did. Moretti's building, with its illusionistic and eclectic combination of modernist and historicist elements has been celebrated as a masterpiece of postwar architecture. Robert Venturi (2002, 20), in his influential 1966 work, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, a kind of manifesto of architectural postmodernism, refers fleetingly but significantly to *Il girasole*, asking whether it is "one building with a split, or two buildings joined?"⁸

The skepticism generated by *Il girasole*, which Venturi seems to enjoy, extends beyond the building's formal play and into questions of its authorial provenance and its wider historical and geographical situation. Moretti was not only a productive and successful architect during the Fascist period, he was an ardent supporter of the regime, even up until the final faltering moments of the Republic of Salò, the reason for which he was imprisoned in the immediate postwar period. The street on which we find *Il girasole*, the Viale Bruno Buozzi, is similarly meaningful. It was designed as one of the principal arteries of the neighborhood of Parioli, a suburb just north of Piazza del Popolo that was developed especially for upper- middle-class citizens and members of the Fascist hierarchy. However, this street's first name was the Viale dei Martiri Fascisti—the Boulevard of Fascist Martyrs. The street was renamed in 1944 after Buozzi, a syndicalist, one of the last great labor organizers to oppose the regime, who was killed by the Germans in 1944.

The speed and fluidity with which we are allowed to travel down the expanse of the Viale Bruno Buozzi is, perhaps, of a piece with the mobility of place names and the plasticity of historical consciousness. How can we tell what is old from what is new here? How do we decide between *Il girasole's* heavy historicist rustication and its suspended staircase and floating facades of plate glass? Moretti himself entertains this undecidability, in a language that itself hovers between the abstractly metaphorical and the historically referential:

The problems confronted [in *Il Girasole*] . . . are evident: plasticity integral to the entire volume of the edifice; a break in the clarity and homogeneity of surfaces with areas of deep and violent shadows; coincidence everywhere and always of strictly logical and functional factors with lyrical and expressive factors—that is, expression of form exclusively through structure and therefore in the most minute details; full plastic freedom of expression in non-loadbearing surfaces; the importance of the travertine

revetment at the base made evident through the placement of the stone panels according to purely abstract designs, so as not to appear in any way as though they were performing any structural task. (quoted in Bucci 2002, 62 n. 30)

Moretti seems to be expounding the pleasure of the building's undecidability, but we might posit that he is asking a question: does historical or historicist reference matter? Or does it matter when we find out that they don't matter at all, in the way that we know that the massive travertine blocks that frame the building's entrance do nothing to support the weight of the stories above? While Moretti's questions seem to entertain a nearly nihilistic sense of play, the fact that he asks them at all suggests the endurance of the weight of a past and the dizzying pleasure of a present built on increasingly immaterial—or at least invisible—foundations.

I ask these questions of this building and its seemingly contingent—and at the very least, fleeting—appearance in “Gli italiani si voltano” precisely because the film re-performs the questions posed by the building itself and by Moretti's account of it. Does it matter that the building appears when and where it does in the film? Given Lattuada's knowledge of Rome, his sensitivity to the specificity of urban space and given, as well, *Il girasole's* (and Moretti's) notoriety, I doubt that there is anything happenstance about the building's appearance in the film. But these questions can still be asked in isolation from an intentionalist or authorial framework. It is the fleeting (apparent) contingency of this appearance—its rhetoric of the happenstance—that makes the appearance itself so fascinating. It is as if, by chance, in the briefest of shots of *Il girasole*, the complexity of postwar Italian culture blossoms into view. We see—through the act of seeing itself—an Italy simultaneously mired in and liberated from the horrible weight of its past.

Conclusion (looking and seeing)

And yet it's not entirely the case that we do, in fact, see these things through seeing, through merely turning around to look. Seeing can be subtended by and produce knowledge, despite the fact that certain invitations to see do not necessarily seem like invitations to know. What don't we see when we are able to feel the effortless of our

gaze as it extends itself from the Via del Corso and runs into the mausoleum of Augustus? We see through what's missing, and what's missing remains there through the fact of the void its absence creates: the emptiness that is really a fullness, through which the gaze, the glance, conducts itself. We know from feminist film theory that the gaze itself is a force, a density, an opacity. So too is the urban space through which it travels. It falls to us to know, and in knowing to make heavy and dense what appears, at first glance, as it does in "Gli italiani si voltano," to be light and liberated.

The lesson that "Gli italiani si voltano" teaches can be observed again and again in Italian cinema of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Vittorio De Sica's *Il tetto* (*The Roof*, 1956) narrates the desperate search for adequate (private) housing. At a critical moment in the film, its protagonists Natale and Luisa are shown crossing Rome in search of a site in the periphery on which to build an illegal one-room house. The conceit of the film's plot hinges on a Roman law that permits an illegal, or, in Italian parlance, "abusive" (*abusiva*) construction—one that has not been granted building permits—to remain standing if it has a roof by the time the authorities have discovered its existence. Thus, if Natale and Luisa can build their home, complete with a roof, in the dark of night before day breaks, they keep their house. It is nighttime as two trucks carry them, their friends who are helping them, their few belongings, and some scavenged building supplies. The trucks are shown crossing in front of the Coliseum and moving north up the Via dei Fori Imperiali, the road that leads up to Piazza Venezia. Here, Luisa and Natale's way—however difficult—is made easier by the broad stretch of road they travel down. Our job of locating them in space, at the center of Rome—if only for this moment in the film—is also made easier by the luminescent backdrop of the Coliseum's moonlit travertine. The image of the trucks passing in front of this ancient monument is a beautiful one, even or especially in its obvious contrasts between dark and light, old and new, grandiose and humble, timeless and harried by time. The shot's mute irony inheres in the fact that the road they travel on was created by the sort of Fascist sventramenti discussed above. The Via dell'Impero—the road of empire, in Italian, as it was called under Fascism—was meant to facilitate automobile traffic through the city, but also to

prioritize visually, spatially, and ideologically the connection between the Coliseum's grandeur and the Piazza Venezia, the administrative seat of Mussolini's power. Hundreds of habitable houses (many belonging to working-class families) were destroyed to create this road. *Il tetto*, whether consciously or not, traces another set of meanings on this road. Its characters' lives are subject to the impersonal but hardly impartial forces that govern who lives where in the city at any given time. The fact that they will live so far from the city's center, in a construction that only minimally qualifies as housing, is made intelligible by the striking shots of the trucks moving past the Coliseum under the moonlight. If we stop at the striking nature of the image, we might forget that the road to living on the city's periphery was paved by the Fascist authorities, and we might fail to grasp concretely how the "happy" conclusion of Natale and Lusia's story of under-housing is, in many important senses, absolutely continuous with a much longer history of urban displacement.

The lesson can be observed again in Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (*L'Eclisse*, 1962). We are invited to gaze over the female protagonist Vittoria's shoulder twice: once onto an architectural curiosity in EUR and another time into the Piazza Campitelli. Both shots are constructed almost in almost exactly the same manner. In the first, which occurs at the very beginning of the film, our view over the character's shoulder shows us the funny "funghetto," the mushroom-shaped water tower in EUR. The view of the water tower, which dates from the 1950s reinvention of the area as a middle-class suburb, seems to mark this area of Rome as alien to the geographies of everyday life that we witness when the film shifts its action to Rome's center. Here we encounter places such as Piazza Campitelli, which is overlooked by the male protagonist Piero's family flat and which we see, over Vittoria's shoulder, in the second of our rhyming shots, toward the film's end. The similarity of these two shots' construction encourages us to see something in these images that is and is not there. When we look over Vittoria's shoulder at Piazza Campitelli, what we see at the end of the Piazza is the Via del Mare, another road made possible by the Fascist sventramenti, a series of disembowelings that, in this instance, demolished all that lay between the Campidoglio and the Theater of Marcellus, and that

initiated the journey from Rome's center to points south and west, like EUR and Ostia, Rome's "beach." Whether we look over Vittoria's shoulder and see a slightly sinister water tower in the suburbs, or an innocuous opening onto a road in the center of Rome, in both instances, what we can actually see only tells us part of the story. Our ability to see depends on the ability to see what is no longer visible, even and especially when the disappearance of what is no longer visible seems to be exactly what has generated the means by which our eye moves about as it does now.⁹

There are numerous examples from films shot in Rome of these sorts of dense *and* empty urban locations. My purpose at this point in my essay is not to convince by way of exhaustively listing them, but by demonstrating how a use of the complex economies of absence and presences in Roman urban space is something we witness in some of postwar Italian cinema's most impressive films and something that is key to understanding these films' politics, or to understanding the films politically. (These same uses of space might also be noticeable in films less noticed, less canonical than those mentioned here.) "Gli italiani si voltano" concludes disconcertingly in a big, nearly empty piazza by the side of the Tiber. This then was one of the city's edges. What does it mean for the film to leave us here, after a long and uncomfortable bus ride, in the aftermath of a near-miss sexual assault? My analysis of this film and my concluding glances at subsequent films shot in Rome suggest that looking may provide the answer, as long as we remember that often when there is nearly nothing to look at, there may be everything to see.

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² In fact, this piazza and its environs became a magnet for a number of immigrant communities (especially Chinese and African) from the 1970s onwards. The piazza figures significantly, as well, as a large disorienting space in Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948). On the piazza's representation in cinema, see Caldwell 2011.

³ This logic actually breaks down in the shot that immediately follows the shot of the woman leaving the Hassler, as I will discuss below. But I think it is fair to say that the intention of the shots taken in Piazza del Popolo and in front of the Hassler is to let us know that we are firmly inside Rome's historic center, after which the film may play loosely with space.

⁴ We could see this arrival at the Piazza del Popolo and the movement toward a modern tourist destination (the Hassler) as proleptic of Fellini's use of the Via Veneto, Piazza del Popolo, and peripheral Rome in the opening movements of *La dolce vita* (*La Dolce Vita*, 1960). In *La dolce vita*, however, the movement is reversed, from center to periphery, as the protagonist Marcello and his evening's companion Maddalena depart from the Via Veneto, the ultimate tourist destination for many 1950s-1960s international travellers, to Piazza del Popolo, where Grand Tour tourists would have made their first arrival to Rome, and then—after picking up a prostitute—out to the periphery.

⁵ I should mention that, when thinking about this film's nearly relentless objectification of women, we should also bear in mind that many of Lattuada's films, especially those from the period of neorealism, feature highly complex and nuanced representations of female subjectivity (and the trials of being female in Italy). In this context I would mention especially *Il bandito* (*The Bandit*, 1946) and *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity*, 1948). Whether "Gli italiani si voltano" is merely sexist or *about* sexism, I leave to the reader/viewer.

⁶Recent historiography has downplayed some of Italo Insolera's estimation of how directly linked were the populations of demolished neighborhoods and those of newly constructed Fascist borgate. See Salsano 2010.

⁷ Montesi was murdered in 1953, the same year that *L'amore in città* was released. Pinkus (2003, 14-15) briefly discusses "Gli italiani si voltano."

⁸ A photographic illustration of *Il girasole's* façade appears in Venturi 2002, 22.

⁹ I have analyzed at length these shots from *L'eclisse* in Rhodes 2011a.