View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by WestminsterResearch

Article

Forum Italicum
0(0) 1–15
© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00145858211025486
journals.sagepub.com/home/foi

Olmi and Pasolini: Industrialisation, the underdog and 'ecological eschatology' in *Manon finestra 2* (1956) and *Grigio* (1957)

Silvia Angeli

University of Westminster, UK

Abstract

This article focuses on the collaboration between Ermanno Olmi and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Two key figures of the Italian cinematic tradition, Olmi and Pasolini have joined efforts on two occasions, as the Bergamasque director asked Pasolini to provide a commentary for his short films *Manon finestra 2* (1956) and *Grigio* (1957). Two very different products, the two shorts offer a very compelling take on the process of industrialisation taking place in Italy in the 1950s. While *Manon* presents a slightly more positive view of the transition that Italy has undergone, *Grigio* is unequivocal in its condemnation, putting forward an alarming thesis: in order for this new society to exist, differences must be erased, communities are to disappear and the least advantaged will be left behind. However, this proposition also has a more optimistic counterpart; namely, the idea that these very communities remain the roots and the true point of reference of our civilisation.

Keywords

ecological eschatology, industrialisation, Italian cinema, Olmi, Pasolini, short films

Corresponding author:

Silvia Angeli, School of Media and Communication, University of Westminster, Watford Road, Harrow Campus, Northwick Park, Harrow, HA1 3TP, UK.
Email: S.Angeli1@westminster.ac.uk

Introduction

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) and Ermanno Olmi (1931–2018) are undoubtedly two of the key figures of the Italian cinematic tradition. Born less than a decade apart, they began their careers in film around the same time. Olmi shot his first short documentary *Piccoli calabresi a Suna sul Lago Maggiore* for the electricity company Edisonvolta in 1953, while Pasolini's first cinematic foray was as screenwriter for Mario Soldati's 1955 film *La donna del fiume* (*The River Girl*).

The two were certainly familiar with and admired each other's work. For instance, in 'The Written Language of Reality', Pasolini (2005) famously analysed a sequence from Olmi's *Il tempo si è fermato* (*Time Stood Still*, 1959), reading it as an example of the cinema of prose and juxtaposing it with a scene from Bernardo Bertolucci's *Prima della rivoluzione* (*Before the Revolution*, 1964), which he considered an example of the cinema of poetry. For his part, Olmi openly spoke of Pasolini as a friend on several occasions. In an interview with Sergio Toffetti (2005), Olmi recalled meeting Pasolini during a trip to Rome in the company of writer Goffredo Parise in 1954. He also describes this encounter in his 2012 book *L'apocalisse è un lieto fine,*[1] where he suggested that growing up in an economically deprived area like rural Friuli had granted Pasolini not only the intellectual but also the emotional tools to truly understand the Italian working class, especially those living outside the comforts of capitalist society (Olmi, 2012). The Bergamasque director also praised Pasolini's independence of thought and his refusal to align with pre-established ideological categories (Olmi, 2012). It was arguably these characteristics – together with the intellectual's undoubtable talent and growing reputation as a screenwriter – that compelled Olmi to avail himself of Pasolini's help for two short films and to ask him to write the commentary for *Manon finestra 2* (1956, henceforth *Manon*) and *Grigio* (1957).

While the thematic similarities in the works of Olmi and Pasolini – such as ideological proximity to and empathy with the lower classes, a strong defence of popular culture and spiritual research – are generally well known, the two have been rarely studied together and their collaborations seldom acknowledged, particularly outside Italy. The reason for this is ascribable, at least in part, to how the two are critically perceived. While Olmi's filmography is associated with sentiments of faith and obedience to Catholic precepts, Pasolini's production is inevitably related to his (tormented) adherence to Marxism,[2] to his troubled relationship with the Catholic Church and to his homosexuality. While Olmi's films are considered traditional in both form and content and even old-fashioned to the point of unimaginative, Pasolini's works are identified by a sense of scandal and provocation and marked by their stylistic innovation.

Biographical features and aesthetic approaches notwithstanding, numerous areas of ideological and thematic convergence are identifiable in their works. Indeed, as Pettigrew (2020: 33) puts it in a recent publication on the cinema of Olmi, 'their relationship seems to have allowed them to test out their artistic ambitions and confirm their social commitments'.

In the first instance, the two appear to share a certain disposition towards the role of cinema and its relationship with reality. On this note, Olmi (2001: 204) recalls that

'with Pasolini, we spoke a lot about cinema, not in a technical sense, but about the way an author should position themselves towards reality'.[3] He adds that it was precisely this approach that signalled their break from neorealism, which he believed had lost its initial revolutionary impetus.

Further, and more importantly for this article, both filmmakers were deeply preoccupied with the human and environmental costs of the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, which had turned a predominantly rural Italy into an industrial power with the fastest growing per capita income in Europe (Ginsborg, 1990). While this transformation eventually improved the living conditions for the majority of the Italian population, the immediate and tangible reality was often problematic, particularly in larger urban areas, which were characterised by a 'lack of decent housing, schools and welfare facilities, especially for immigrants' (Pollard, 2008: 133). More generally, the 'economic miracle' had some far-reaching negative consequences, ranging from the emergence of neo-capitalist and consumerist values to the standardisation of mass society, the depopulation of the countryside and the despoiling of ecosystems.

A problematisation of the notion of progress is thus central to the work of both Olmi and Pasolini. Within this context, the filmmakers directed their sympathies towards those residing outside the comfort of capitalist society. Precisely because of their extraneousness to the economic gains of the boom, the inhabitants of the peasant world – and for Pasolini, the inhabitants of the Roman 'borgata', the slums born out of the rapid process of urbanisation – came to represent the last moral and ideological outpost against neo-capitalism, consumerism and middle-class values.

These elements, which are present in the vast majority of their works, are analysed in this article in relation to their two collaborations, Olmi's two short films *Manon* and *Grigio*, for which Pasolini scripted the voiceover. Two very different films – the first a documentary produced by Edisonvolta, the latter a work of fiction produced by the independent company RCT – nevertheless offer a compelling assessment of the processes of modernisation and industrialisation taking place in Italy in the mid- to late 1950s.

As with any article focusing on artistic collaborations, there is here an unresolvable tension. Are these two shorts to be considered chiefly Olmi's works? To what extent did discussions between the two authors shape and inform the final products? Did Pasolini's commentary, which according to Olmi was written after viewing rough cuts of the shorts, prompt re-editing? Pettigrew, for instance, considers this working relationship to be deeply formative – even foundational – for Olmi's cinema, stating that 'their brief collaboration brought Olmi to the realization that he could use the cinema as a tool to render the ordinary sacred and compelled him to explore the medium's spiritual capacity' (Pettigrew, 2020: 22-23). While I would be more cautious in attributing such a powerful impact to Pasolini, it is obvious that this association was mutually enriching and beneficial.

My aim here, however, is not to conduct a philological examination of archival sources to determine the precise extent of Pasolini's contribution to the projects, as

this would be a sterile and likely impossible exercise. A close analysis of *Manon* and *Grigio* – two works often overlooked by critics and difficult to access given their limited circulation[4] – will become instead a point of departure for a wider discourse relating to the dramatisation of the human and environmental expenditures of modernisation in the works of both filmmakers. To this end, I provide the necessary biographical information and refer to Olmi's and Pasolini's interviews and writings, along with some of their other films, with the aim of contextualising the two short films on which they collaborated and illuminating both thematic and stylistic points of contact between the two men. As one of the most prolific and acute political commentators of his day, Pasolini naturally also becomes a theoretical point of reference, an interlocutor whose theses are used to frame the two works.

Manon

In a career spanning more than 60 years, Olmi was incredibly prolific, with productions ranging from documentaries to short and feature films, intended for both television and the big screen. In spite of these successes, his reserved personality and the everyday subject matter and sober quality of his works have made him a rather uncommon, even peculiar, figure among Italian directors.

A self-taught filmmaker, he began his career by directing documentaries for the Edisonvolta electricity company. Edisonvolta began producing documentaries to promote the industrial development of Italy, filming construction work on dams, tunnels and high-voltage systems. Noticing young Olmi's keen interest for the arts and as a reward for a series of successful theatre performances he had organised with some of his co-workers, in 1953 his superiors purchased a 16 mm camera with which Olmi began to shoot his first works, thus effectively becoming the company's official director (Mazzei, 2004). This partnership, which lasted for nearly a decade, was fruitful and mutually beneficial. Indeed, in spite of his young age, Olmi was able to exercise great influence on the Edisonvolta business mode (Bonifazio, 2016). For his part, Olmi repeatedly spoke of his years at Edisonvolta in glowing terms, even stating in one interview that 'Edison was my whole world' (Toffetti, 2005: 82).

This was certainly an extremely busy time for the Italian director who, between 1953 and 1961, directed 18 short films and one medium-length film, as well as working as either supervisor or editor on roughly the same number of productions (Bruni, 2014). In relation to this, Young observes how these early works attested to both Olmi's familiarity with Italian working-class life and his ability to capture and reflect the 'spirit of transformation' shaking the country at the time (Young, 2001: 57). Furthermore, these short documentaries, while obviously serving both didactic and promotional purposes, were never divorced from a keen attention to the human and natural components. As Antonello notes in his article on Italian industrial cinema, Olmi's artistic output during this time was marked by a focus on 'everyday, simple characters, by a dialogic but balanced tension between nature and the human, and by minimal, marginal stories, dominated by "dynamics of work and desire"' (Antonello, 2019: 159).

This is certainly true of *Manon*, which Olmi made in 1956. The nearly 13-minute documentary focuses on one of Europe's largest hydroelectric power plants, set at the foot of Mount Adamello, in Val di Fumo, between the northern Italian regions of Lombardy and Trentino-Alto Adige. Considered his first relevant work, it brought him to national attention: not only did *Manon* win an award at the *V Festival della Montagna* in Trento, but it also impressed the likes of Roberto Rossellini, who came to see in Olmi his rightful heir (Mazzei, 2004). The film's title comes from miners' jargon: indeed, in Italian, mine holes are referred to as 'finestre' ('windows'), with every team in charge of a specific 'window', while 'Manon' appears to refer instead to Puccini's opera *Manon Lescaut*, whose second-act aria is incidentally titled 'Sulla vetta tu del monte' ('On the top of the mountain').

In an interview, Olmi recounts how he showed *Manon* to Pasolini, which the intellectual greatly appreciated, and then asked him to script the voiceover, which was considered a key component for a documentary to attract audiences (Toffetti, 2005). At the time, Pasolini had just begun taking his first steps into the world of cinema. The decision to dedicate himself to the seventh art was, at least initially, not spurred by passion but by economic need, as he struggled to provide for himself and his mother Susanna after moving to Rome in 1950 (Mozzati, 2017). When asked by Jon Halliday (writing as Oswald Stack) in 1968 why he had collaborated with directors with whom he had very little in common, Pasolini was frank: 'Purely practical reasons. When I came to Rome I was completely broke. [. . .] Obviously, I couldn't choose who I was going to work with, it was the other way around' (Stack, 1969: 31). He reiterated the same sentiment in an interview with Jean Duflot (1999: 1437) the following year, stating that when he agreed to write his first screenplay he was 'literally dying of hunger'. Thankfully, Pasolini had a rather wide circle of friends and admirers on whom he could count and who could offer remuneration in exchange for collaboration. By 1956, then, he had already worked as a screenwriter on Mario Soldati's *La donna del fiume* (*The River Girl*, 1955) and Luis Trenker's *Il prigioniero della montagna* (1955).

Manon is constructed around a series of seemingly unreconcilable opposites: untamed nature and industrialisation, inside and outside, light and dark. But Olmi – thanks partly to Pasolini's poetic but restrained commentary, read by Arnoldo Foà – is able to navigate these sharp contrasts seamlessly and effortlessly. As the opening credits roll over a shot of the woods, we hear an eclectic combination of sounds: birds chirping, bells tolling and sirens marking the beginning of the shift. Indeed, this aural mix characterises the entire documentary, where drilling and dynamite explosions alternate with the sound of water falling down rocks, thunder booming and crickets chirping. As the voiceover introduces us to the location, a series of aerial shots perfectly captures both the rugged, majestic beauty of the valley and the scale of the efforts of this particular enterprise: the project envisaged the construction of five dams and four hydroelectric plants, one of which was intended to boast the biggest turbines in the world.

After this short introduction, however, the focus shifts to the miners and their daily routine. As is customary in Olmi's work, there is great attention to detail; the

camera lingers on the workers' tools or on their calm and expert gestures as they perform their tasks. In particular, Olmi alternates wider shots of the miners at work with close-ups of them gazing into the night sky with contemplative expressions on their faces, smoking or wiping sweat from their foreheads. Such insistence on the miners' faces is hardly surprising, as the faces and bodies of non-professional actors were a source of deep fascination for both Olmi and Pasolini.

Interestingly, their reflections on the topic also became the starting points for enlightening sociological and anthropological considerations. In particular, Pasolini famously theorised about the appearance (and credibility) of non-professional actors, pitting their spontaneity and naturalness against the self-consciousness of professional performers. In an interview with Peroni (2001: 2934–2935), he observed how only non-actors were able to 'give themselves truly, fully, without mediations, without fear, without shame, without fear of being ridiculed – in short: generously'. Olmi shared a similar view, which he – pragmatic as ever – summarised thusly: 'I don't use a fig to make a pear', before adding that non-professional actors are able to 'bring to the film a weight, really a constitution of truth, which [. . .] creates palpitations – those vibrations so right, so real, so believable, and therefore not repeatable' (Cardullo, 2009: 105–106).

These views become particularly compelling when confronted with a more recent statement given by Olmi. In a 2005 interview with Toffetti, he lamented that it had become very hard to find 'interesting' people to film, as nowadays people tended to have 'facce da merendine' ('snack faces') (Toffetti, 2005: 44), suggesting that, over the course of the decades, a process had taken place that had resulted in highly standardised behaviours and attitudes, often derived from imitating the media. The director's assessment here cannot help but bring to mind Pasolini's notion of 'anthropological mutation', which he formulated in a series of articles published in newspapers in the early 1970s. The concept is explored in quite some depth in 'Studio sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia' ('A Study on the Anthropological Revolution in Italy'), originally published in the *Corriere della sera* newspaper on 10 June 1974 under the title 'Gli italiani non son più quelli' ('Italians Are Not the Same Anymore'). Here, Pasolini argues that two inextricably linked phenomena had taken place in his country, leading to a radical and irreversible transformation of its social and cultural fabric. On the one hand, the middle class had swapped its old values for a 'hedonistic ideology of consumption' (Pasolini, 2013b: 40); at the same time, pre-industrial, peasant Italy had disappeared, leaving a void waiting to be filled by the ever-expanding, ravenous bourgeoisie. This had, in turn, resulted in '"cultural" homologation' (Pasolini, 2013b: 41). On this note, Williams astutely observes how, for Pasolini, this is:

> more than just a shift in the structure of society or its cultural forms: its effects mean nothing less than a thorough rewiring of the human, from its memory to its gestures, written in the body and discernible in patterns of speech themselves, no matter what is said. (Williams, 2020: 134)

While it is true that both Olmi and Pasolini came to their respective conclusions decades after the release of *Manon*, the implications of such momentous changes

taking place in the country and their impact on its population were certainly not lost on them at this point in time. While not a fully developed argument in *Manon*, the social and environmental costs of industrialisation are nevertheless implied at numerous junctures. For instance, after introducing the miners, the voiceover remarks how they have often come from afar, leaving their homes and families behind in order to work. On this note, Bonifazio (2016: 73) points out the following: 'In Olmi's films for SCE [Sezione Cinema Edisonvolta], the appraisal of modernity is always accompanied by a pathetic commemoration of the human expenditure that the process of modernisation costs both in terms of human beings and nature'. It is here that the short takes on a truly poetic quality, as Foà voices Pasolini's commentary to observe that 'they are here, alone, in a sort of exile, so close to the sky and yet so far from it, deep in the bowels of the mountain'.

The miners' feelings of solitude are further amplified by the use of silence. In fact, the film lacks a soundtrack – the only such instance in Olmi's industrial cinema (Bruni, 2014) – and relies heavily on the long pauses separating the different parts of the commentary. Bonifazio believes that, while this syncopated mode of narration serves to mirror the quick changes undergone by the country, it also endows the work with a more pronounced poetic quality:

> Narratively, the gap that is internal to and constitutive of the development of modern society is reenacted in the interruption of the storyline by unnecessary pauses in the voice-over's commentary – what could be called, to put it in another way, a poetic flight in the prosaic form of the documentary. (Bonifazio, 2016: 74)

The long pauses certainly contribute to creating a particularly evocative atmosphere, as silence here is linked to states of contemplation and reflection – things that are typical of the works of both Olmi and Pasolini. In particular, the sparse use of dialogue, or rather the employment of speech-silence, characterises Olmi's entire filmography. The Bergamasque director typically characterises speech-silence as positive by associating it with deep emotions, 'especially profound feelings of love and intimacy, forms of wonder that verge on mysticism, and peasant simplicity' (Brook, 2008: 270).

Similarly, Pasolini's works also tend to rely heavily on silent moments and more generally on the sparse use of dialogue. One has only to think of films like *Teorema* (*Theorem*, 1968), in which only 923 words are spoken, as the ads for its US release boasted (Canby, 1969), or his 'Trilogy of Life'. On this note, Brook observed how *Il Decameron* (*The Decameron*, 1971) features 27 scenes without speech, *I racconti di Canterbury* (*The Canterbury Tales*, 1972) 28 and *Il fiore delle Mille e una Notte* (*Arabian Nights*, 1974) 40 (Brook, 2008). Manzoli (2001) argues that silence in Pasolini's cinema is of a metaphysical nature and generally associated with the sacred. This becomes evident if one thinks once again of *Teorema*, where silence is used to convey the bourgeois family's reverence towards the godlike Visitor, as they quietly gaze at the man, contemplating his divine presence. Such practices of 'worshipful silence' (MacCulloch, 2013: 21) are disseminated throughout the Scriptures,

where silence is often associated with contemplation, spiritual depth and wisdom. For instance, the book of Zechariah clearly prescribes silence before God: ‘Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling’ (Zech 2:13). Silence as an ascetic practice is also the first step on a path that sees the maid, Emilia, becoming somewhat of a saint figure within her immediate peasant community – a path that culminates with levitating and performing healing miracles.

In *Manon*, silence not only accompanies (and heightens) contemplative states but is also presented as a personality trait of the miners. The commentary alerts us to this by emphasising their hard work and dedication, explaining how they quietly prepare for their shifts and zealously carry out their duties without unnecessary chatter or distraction. The miners have neither the time nor the desire to engage in lengthy conversations; instead, they endure hardship in silence, accommodating their trying circumstances without complaint. Their silence is in this sense presented in the short as something akin to an inclination, an inner disposition, even a vocation. In line with a Christian perspective that sees an abundance of words as essentially dishonest and misleading (cf. Prov 10:19; Prov 17:28, Mt 5:37; Mt 12:36), the labourers display a certain suspicion towards the excess of spoken words. Words can trick and deceive; they can blur the lines between truth and lie. For this reason, the miners prefer to focus on the task at hand, with no trivialities, no distractions and no complaints, accepting what is sent their way with remarkable patience.

The labourers’ devotion to their job is matched by their devotion to the figure of Saint Barbara. Indeed, the patron saint of miners and gunners and more generally of people working with explosives (Farmer, 2011) is mentioned twice in the film, as images show the labourers placing daisies and gentians to express their gratitude at her makeshift altar. A keen attention to forms of popular religiosity and devotional practices – often pitted against the empty rituals of Church hierarchies – is yet another trait that Olmi and Pasolini share. Although this interest takes very different forms in the works of the two filmmakers, they are both chiefly concerned with the values of early Christianity and the Gospel message of social justice and equality – a message fully embodied by Pope John XXIII (born Angelo Roncalli [1881–1963]), whom both men admired and whose personality and legacy they both explored in their work.[5] In particular, it was Roncalli’s peasant origins, his environmental policies and his concern for the least advantaged that appealed so deeply to both directors.

Grigio

The circumstances of *Grigio*’s inception are very similar to those of *Manon*, in that Olmi once again approached Pasolini about writing the commentary for the short film. In spite of his busy schedule, Pasolini agreed to the collaboration after seeing the first rough cut in Rome (Levantesi, 1995). *Grigio*, however, was not commissioned by Edisonvolta; it was produced by the independent company RCT, a rare exception in Olmi’s artistic output around this time. Furthermore, *Grigio* sets itself apart from Olmi’s previous works with its more pronounced experimental quality –

it makes frequent use of anamorphic lenses, for example – and its straddling of the line between documentary and fiction. On this note, Levantesi (1995) argues that the term 'documentary', often used by Italian critics in relation to *Grigio*, cannot be applied here. Perniola (2014: 134) prefers 'documentary fable', describing the short film as a 'symbolic parable' behind which it is possible to identify the traces of the 'poetics of suffering' typical of Olmi's work.

Grigio follows the journey of its eponymous protagonist (a small stray dog) across Rome. It is clearly divided into three parts: the first focuses on Grigio's life in the countryside, the second his arrival into the city and the third his capture and vivisection for research purposes. Interestingly, Olmi, who wrote the screenplay together with his industrialist friend Gian Luca Guzzetti, had actually rescued the dog from a shelter and trained him for more than a month in preparation for filming (Levantesi, 1995; Perniola, 2014).

The opening of the film echoes that of *Manon*; it also begins with a shot of the landscape accompanied by sounds of nature (we hear, for instance, a dog barking) and a work siren. Unlike *Manon*, however, *Grigio* does have a soundtrack, and gaps in the commentary are often filled by jazzy motifs. In the first part, Olmi shows us Grigio living happily in the countryside: he chases a postman who, in a futile attempt to escape, tries to quickly pedal away; he observes a frog in a pond with great curiosity; he begs (unsuccessfully) for leftovers from a man on his lunch break. As the voiceover recites, Grigio 'doesn't know he has heart, yet he gives it all. There is nothing that doesn't interest him, no adventure he doesn't get lost in'. He is always on the move, searching for food, water, shelter and enjoyment. After all, 'the whole world belongs to Grigio, because Grigio belongs to the whole world'. In the second part of the short, we see Grigio happily trotting on the outskirts of an unnamed city.

Here, Olmi gifts us with a slightly amusing (and cinematically self-conscious) gesture as Grigio stops in front of a film poster plastered on a billboard. The film in question is Fabio De Agostini's *Lauta Mancia* (*Big Dog Lost*, 1956), which, incidentally, tells the story of a dog running away from home and ending up being captured by an animal control officer. However, De Agostini's protagonist is a Great Dane, whose intimidating size and formidable pose create a sharp contrast with Grigio's diminutive form. After this brief pause, Grigio trots on, only to stop again in front of a music shop, quietly observing a man at work. Throughout these sequences, the camera is generally aligned with Grigio's gaze: we rarely see people's faces, with the camera lingering instead on their feet, along with cars and bike tyres.

The city comes across as a particularly chaotic environment, where everyone is in a rush and even the simple act of wandering the streets can turn into a dangerous endeavour. This contrast between urban spaces, portrayed as disharmonious and unsafe, and the Edenlike countryside is a recurring feature of Olmi's work and is addressed in a number of his films, from *E venne un uomo* (*A Man Named John*, 1965) to *Un certo giorno* (*One Fine Day*, 1968) and his masterpiece *L'albero degli zoccoli* (*The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, 1978). On this note, Young observes how the adoption of this ideological posture has often been detrimental to Olmi's reception, as critics

have accused him of being an 'apologist for an unchanging natural world and an enemy of modernity' (Young, 2001: 60).

In *Grigio*, the equation between city and danger becomes clear as our protagonist attempts to cross the road: in a cacophony of loud noises, he is overwhelmed by cars screeching to a halt and freezes in the middle of the road. As he is lying prostrate on the ground, shaking in fear, we see a pair of feet approaching him menacingly. We realise that these feet belong to an animal control officer who, after putting a tight rope around the little dog's neck, unceremoniously drags him away. However, unlike the fate of the dogs in Gillo Pontecorvo's short *Cani dietro le sbarre* (*Dogs Behind Bars*, 1954), Grigio is not taken to a shelter but to a research institute. Here, we see doctors and nurses coming and going, and Grigio on the operation table, hooked up to a ventilator. The voiceover explains that doctors are using him as a guinea pig in an attempt to perform heart surgery. It is in this third part that the short film takes on a more experimental quality, with sequences shot at peculiar angles, often upside down in order to mirror the little dog's point of view. While Grigio ends up dying, his sacrifice might one day help save human lives, as the voiceover remarks, before concluding: 'You had nothing; you only had your life. Yet, you can swear by it: you've been happy. What you had was – and always will be – enough for you'. The statement is then followed by a very short epilogue, where we see images of the dog running happily in a field, superimposed with a shot of the sky.

These final sequences, saccharine as they no doubt are, raise some particularly important questions, with director and writer pitting the simplicity of creatures like Grigio against what cannot help but come across as a particular form of human hubris, specifically the obsession with scientific and technological progress, driven by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and the compulsion to exceed the limits imposed by biology.

There is here, compared to *Manon*, a deeper reflection on the actual costs of modernisation and particularly on those who are left behind by it – be it peasants, sub-proletarians or even little stray dogs. In this sense, just as Grigio's 'resigned suffering' (Levantesi, 1995: 202) – much like the miners, the dog does not talk, if one discounts barking – is yet another incarnation of the many hardship-facing characters populating the works of Olmi and Pasolini, the film itself becomes part of a wider discourse about processes of industrialisation and changing mores that is central in their works.

On this note, it is worth pointing out how, in this first part of the short film, the portrayal of the small dog's adventures is interspersed with shots of the landscape and excavators at work, another nod to the unstoppable process of industrialisation. However, for those viewers familiar with Pasolini's literary body of work, these images also immediately conjure up his long poem 'Il pianto della scavatrice' ('The Cry of the Excavator)', which was written in 1956 and published in the 1957 collection *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (*Gramsci's Ashes*). 'Il pianto della scavatrice' is at once a deeply personal and political poem, in which the author reflects on two different kinds of changes: those in his life since his move to Rome, and the radical transformations of the physical environment, with a particular focus on the

construction of modern housing projects in the Roman periphery. Such abrupt developments are symbolised in the poem by an 'old excavator' that is 'wailing'. Pasolini humanises the machine here, turning it into a sentient being who mourns the disappearance of the old, pre-industrial world. Indeed, as he writes:

> What used to be
> A stretch of grass, an open expanse,
> And is now a courtyard white as snow
> Enclosed within walls of resentment,
> What used to be a kind of sideshow
> Of fresh plaster façades askew in the sun
> And is now a new city block, bustling
> With an order made of dull misfortune. (Pasolini, 2014: 217)

As Rhodes (2007: 84) notes, 'the excavator's cry is really Rome's cry, is really the world's. The cry protests against "what ends and begins again"'. Pasolini suggests that change is painful, even when this change is 'for the better', as he puts it in the poem. There is in fact always something – or someone – that is lost or left behind, be it rural communities or the people in Roman shanty towns.

This view is to be understood within the context of Pasolini's growing wariness of the Italian middle class, whose values, he contended, were increasingly informing the country's cultural landscape. He believed that the nature of the Italian bourgeoisie was shifting, redefining its own structure, with the result of incorporating everyone into its ranks and effectively erasing any cultural and linguistic differences. In particular, in his analysis, such changes developed along the two lines of infrastructure and the information system. The creation of a modernised road system had abolished physical distances, while the birth of television had levelled the country's historical and cultural particularisms (Pasolini, 2013a) to the point that '[...] the whole of humankind is becoming petit bourgeois' (Peroni, 2001: 2932).

This had happened, of course, with the full consent of the Italian political class, which was very much to blame for having caused damage of unspeakable proportions to the country, as Pasolini observed in his famous 'Il processo' ('The Trial'). The country's political elite was responsible for 'the destruction of the Italian countryside, [. . .] the anthropological degradation of the Italians, [. . .] the savage abandonment of the countryside, for the savage explosion of mass culture and the mass media' (Pasolini, 1987: 79).

Pasolini's concern for preserving peasant and sub-proletarian communities and their dwellings from erasure is very much in line with what Iovino brilliantly terms 'an ecology of difference', arguing that the intellectual's artistic output is dominated by a line of enquiry that considers 'diversity as essential to the existence of the whole' (Iovino, 2015: 103). Elsewhere, Iovino observes that Pasolini is undoubtedly an '*environmental writer and artist*', an eminent representative of 'the tradition of a "social responsibility of art" toward the environment' (Iovino, 2003: 72; emphasis in original) not unlike Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold or Gary Snyder.

However, Pasolini's understanding of the environment, Iovino specifies, goes beyond the geographical and natural dimensions to include its historical and human components. In short, Pasolini conceives the environment as 'a composite territory, stratified in time, being at once a linguistic universe, a memory of places and the whole of this environment's artistic elaborations' (Iovino, 2003: 71).

Pasolini often conveys this complex view of the environment as socially, linguistically and historically layered through the image of burials. For instance, while discussing an episode from *Teorema* in an interview with Duflot, he states that 'preceding civilisations have not disappeared, they're only buried. Thus, peasant civilisation remains buried under the world of workers, under industrial civilisation', before adding: 'Actually, this may very well be the only optimistic moment in the film' (Duflot, 1999: 1502). Pasolini refers here to Emilia, the saint-like maid, burying herself alive. Indeed, in one of the film's final sequences, Emilia leaves her home village and walks to the outskirts of the town in the company of an old woman (played in the film by the director's own mother, Susanna). The two reach a wasteland-like space on the outskirts of the city, most likely a construction site, as suggested by the presence of an excavator. Emilia, who is crying, lies down on the ground and orders the older woman to cover her up until only her eyes remain visible. Then she speaks: 'Don't be afraid. I have not come here to die, but to weep. My tears are not tears of pain, no. They will become a fountain. And it won't be a fountain of pain. Now go, go away, go'. This act has clear revolutionary implications: Emilia, a representative of the peasant community, is buried in the heart of a construction site, 'the foundation of industry, expenditure, and order', as Tong (2001: 87) puts it, thereby displacing it. She gives the land new life, fertilising it with her tears. Interestingly, Pasolini's portrayal of the maid's self-sacrificial act resonates with a well-established tradition in the ancient world; namely, the burial of sacrificial victims, including dogs, in the foundations of public buildings, and more generally, new urban areas (Amoroso et al., 2005; Carafi, 2008). What Pasolini suggests here, as Olmi does in *Grigio*, is that a sacrifice must be made to accommodate modern, capital-driven civilisation. However, if on the one hand both Grigio and Emilia (and more generally, underdogs – be they peasants, sub-proletarians or defenceless animals) must be sacrificed on the altar of so-called progress, buried under the burgeoning middle-class obsession to consume and produce, on the other hand they remain in the eyes of both directors the very foundation of our society, its roots and its sustenance.

On this note, it is worth pointing out that both the discarding of rural communities (especially as dramatised through the notion of 'burial') and their redeeming function have long had an impact on Italian culture in general and cinema in particular, as demonstrated, for example, by Alice Rohrwacher's latest work *Omelia Contadina* (2020), co-authored with the French visual artist JR. Referred to by its creators as a 'cinematic action', this 10-minute short celebrates the funeral of the peasant community of the Alfina plateau. Not only does *Omelia Contadina* explicitly quote Pasolini – during the rite, one of the peasants reads an excerpt from his film *La rabbia* (*The Rage*, 1963) warning us about the consequences of the disappearance of

the pre-industrial civilisation[6] – but the film's last and most poignant line (the widely used 'you buried us, but didn't you know we are seeds?') once again alludes to the fertilising, nutritive function exercised by the peasantry. More importantly, these words appear to foreshadow some sort of *Parousia*: a return, a re-birth of the peasant civilisation, from what we could term an 'ecological-eschatological' perspective. After all, as Olmi reminds us: 'You need to consider that the rural civilisation is the only accomplished civilisation – all the others (industrial, technological, informatic) are temporary' (Colosio, 2013: 139).

Conclusion

Both *Manon* and *Grigio* focus on issues that become dominant in the later films of the two directors: a keen preoccupation with the human and environmental costs of the process of industrialisation in Italy; the emergence of neoliberal values; the ever-increasing power of consumerism; and social and cultural conformism. The close analysis of these two shorts in this article has been a point of departure for a discussion of the presence of these themes in other works by the directors and for an examination of their similarities in terms of style (their use of silence as a way to express heightened states of contemplation and spiritual research; their quest for authenticity and frequent reliance on non-professional actors) and ideology (a keen interest in the Gospel message of solidarity with the poor and underprivileged and a strong – even acritical – admiration for Pope John XXIII; the sanctification of peasant communities).

While *Manon* presents a slightly more positive view of the transition that Italy has undergone, *Grigio* is unequivocal in its condemnation, putting forward an alarming thesis: in order for this new society to exist, differences must be erased, communities are to disappear and the least advantaged will be left behind. However, this proposition also has a more optimistic counterpart; namely, the idea that these very communities remain the roots and the true point of reference of our civilisation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the Fondazione Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia for letting me access *Grigio*. I am also grateful to Cristina Parenti and Francesca Magliulo for their precious advice.

ORCID iD

Silvia Angeli https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3009-0102

Notes

1. Here, however, Olmi states that he actually met Pasolini in 1956.
2. A member of the Italian Communist Party between 1947 and 1949, when he was expelled for 'indignità morale' ('moral indignity'), Pasolini often found himself disagreeing with the Communist political class. Much has been written about his complex relationship with Italian Marxism and the Italian Communist Party. See, among others, Francese (1994), Tonelli (2015) and Williams (2020).

3. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian are mine.
4. While *Manon* was released, together with six other shorts, in *Ermanno Olmi. Gli anni Edison. Documentari e cortometraggi 1954–1958*, published by Feltrinelli in 2014, *Grigio* is particularly hard to obtain; it is only available by requesting online access from the Fondazione Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia.
5. Indeed, not only did Pasolini dedicate *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964) to John XXIII's memory, but he also wrote of the Pope in highly appreciative terms on numerous occasions. Similarly, Olmi directed a docu-fiction film about the life of Roncalli, *E venne un uomo* (*A Man Named John*, 1965). The film, which was generally poorly received by critics (Angeli, 2017), was openly defended by Pasolini himself (Morandini, 2009).
6. 'When the classical world has disappeared; when all the peasants and artisans have died; when the industry has made the cycle of production and consumption unstoppable, then our story will be over'.

References

Amoroso A, De Grossi J and Mazzorin F (2005) Sepoltura di cane (IX–VIII sec. a.C.) nell'area perimetrale dell'antica Fidenae (Roma). In: Fiore I, Malerba G and Chilardi S (eds) A*tti del 3°Convegno Nazionale di Archeozoologia*. Syracuse, Italy, 3–5 November 2000. Rome: Studi di Paletnologia II, pp. 311–327.

Angeli S (2017) *Catholicism in Italian cinema in the 'Age of the New Secularisation' (1958–1978)*. PhD Thesis, University of Westminster, UK. Available at: https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/9zwvz/catholicism-in-italian-cinema-in-the-age-of-the-new-secularisation-1958-1978 (accessed 23 February 2021).

Antonello P (2019) The (political) forms of technology: Antonioni, Olmi, De Seta, and post-World War II industrial cinema. *The Italianist* 39(2): 151–170.

Bonifazio P (2016) *Schooling in Modernity: The Politics of Sponsored Films in Postwar Italy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Brook C (2008) Beyond dialogue: Speech-silence, the monologue, and power in the films of Ermanno Olmi. *The Italianist* 28(2): 268–280.

Bruni D (2014) I cortometraggi industriali. In: Tobagi B (ed.) *I volti e le mani*. Milan: Feltrinelli, pp. 87–103.

Canby V (1969) The screen: A parable by Pasolini: *Teorema* in premiere at the Coronet Terence Stamp in role of a visiting god. *New York Times*, 22 April. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1969/04/22/archives/the-screen-a-parable-by-pasolini-teorema-in-premiere-at-the-coronet.html (accessed 22 February 2021).

Carafa A (2008) Uccisioni rituali – sacrifici umani a Roma. Tra centro proto-urbano e prima città-stato. Abbozzando una sintesi. *Scienze dell'Antichità* 14: 705–710.

Cardullo B (2009) Reflecting reality – and mystery: An interview with Ermanno Olmi. In: Cardullo B (ed.) *After Neorealism: Italian Filmmakers and their Films; Essays and Interviews*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 104–105.

Colosio L (2013) Contadini e complici: Un dialogo con Ermanno Olmi. *Scienze Naturali* 1: 137–145.

Duflot J (1999) Il sogno del centauro. Incontri con Jean Duflot [1968–1971]. In: Siti W and de Laude S (eds) *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*. Milan: Mondadori, pp. 1401–1550.

Farmer D (2011) *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Francese J (1994) Pasolini's ''Roman novels'', the Italian Communist Party and the events of 1956. In: Rumble P and Testa B (eds) *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Contemporary Perspectives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 22–39.

Ginsborg P (1990) *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988*. London: Penguin Books.

Iovino S (2003) The ashes of Italy: Pier Paolo Pasolini's ethics of place. In: Gifford J and Zezulka-Mailloux G (eds) *Culture + the State: Landscape and Ecology*. Edmonton: CRC Humanities Studio, pp. 70–91.

Iovino S (2015) *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*. Milan: Edizioni Ambiente.

Levantesi A (1995) Vite da cani. In: Miccichè L (ed.) *Studi su dodici sguardi d'autore in cortometraggio*. Turin: Lindau, pp. 201–203.

MacCulloch D (2013) *Silence: A Christian History*. New York: Viking.

Manzoli G (2001) *Voce e silenzio nel cinema di Pier Paolo Pasolini*. Bologna: Pendagron.

Mazzei L (2004) I documentari industriali di Ermanno Olmi. In: Bernardi S (ed.) *Storia del cinema italiano. Vol IX: 1954–1959*. Venice: Marsilio, pp. 282–288.

Morandini M (2009) *Ermanno Olmi*. Milan: Il castoro.

Mozzati T (2017) *Sceneggiatura di poesia. Pierpaolo Pasolini e il cinema prima di ''Accattone''*. Milan: Mimesis.

Olmi E (2001) Olmi su Olmi. In: Allegretti E and Giraud G (eds) *Ermanno Olmi: L'esperienza di Ipotesi Cinema*. Bologna: Le Mani Editore, pp. 198–210.

Olmi E (2012) *L'apocalisse è un lieto fine. Storie della mia vita e del nostro futuro*. Milan: Rizzoli.

Pasolini PP (1987) The trial. In: Pasolini PP *Lutheran Letters*. New York: Carcanet, pp. 79–85.

Pasolini PP (2005) The written language of reality. In: Barnett LK (ed.) *Heretical Empiricism*. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing LCC, pp. 197–222.

Pasolini PP (2013a) 9 dicembre 1973. Acculturazione e acculturazione. In: Pasolini PP *Scritti Corsari*. Milan: Garzanti, pp. 22–25.

Pasolini PP (2013b) 10 giugno 1974. Studio sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia. In: Pasolini PP *Scritti Corsari*. Milan: Garzanti, pp. 39–44.

Pasolini PP (2014) Il pianto della scavatrice / The Cry of the Excavator. In: Sartarelli S (ed.) *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 188–219.

Perniola I (2014) Il pensionato, Il grigio. In: Tobagi B (ed.) *I volti e le mani*. Milan: Feltrinelli, pp. 133–135.

Peroni L (2001) Intervista rilasciata a Lino Peroni. In: Siti F and Zabagli F (eds) *Per il cinema. Tomo II*. Milan: Mondadori, pp. 2931–2936.

Pettigrew I (2020) *The Cinema of Ermanno Olmi*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Pollard J (2008) *Catholicism in Modern Italy: Religion, Society and Politics Since 1861*. London: Routledge.

Rhodes JD (2007) *Stupendous, Miserable City: Pasolini's Rome*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Stack O (1969) *Pasolini on Pasolini*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Toffetti S (2005) Conversazione con Ermanno Olmi. In: Magliulo F (ed.) *Il mestiere dell'uomo. Ermanno Olmi regista per la Edison*. Milan: Motta-Edison, pp. 17–84.

Tonelli A (2015) *Per indegnità morale. Il caso Pasolini nell'Italia del buon costume*. Bari: Laterza.

Tong J (2001) Crisis of ideology and the disenchanted eye: Pasolini and Bataille. *Contretemps* 2: 74–91.

Williams EC (2020) The loss of the separated world: On Pasolini's communism. In: Peretti L and Raizen K T (eds) *Pier Paolo Pasolini, Framed and Unframed: A Thinker for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 129–158.

Young D (2001) On Earth as it is in Heaven. *Film Comment* 37: 56–62.