URBAN AND RURAL SPACE. ITALIAN AND AMERICAN CINEMA IN THE 1930s

Leonardo Gandini, Università degli Studi di Trento

During the period between the second half of the 1920s and the end of the following decade, both Italy and the United States witnessed a debate focused on contrasting city and countryside, rural life and urban life. While this phenomenon occurred in parallel terms chronologically, it involved the social and intellectual circles in different ways. In the United States, reflections on the metropolitan dimension were made, on the one hand, by sociologists and urbanists, who tried – during a period in which territorial expansion and demographic growth of cities were constant, primarily due to both internal and external immigration – to analyze the risks associated with the social aggregations in small spaces typical of urban life. They also attempted to produce models for alternative development capable of bringing the relationship between individuals and their environment back to a principle of harmony. On the other hand, public morality groups also reflected on the issue, but in a less understated and more ideologically oriented manner, seeing big cities as a place of corrosion and corruption of the founding values of American society – mutual aid, mutual solidarity, individual and collective ethics – values which they instead found present in their highest form of expression in small towns and the countryside. As such came a dual reproof of the city: the urban life not only determined a behavior marked by immorality and egotism in its inhabitants, but also, due to the equal fascination it held over people living elsewhere, spurred a phenomenon of gradual depopulation of rural and provincial areas.

In Italy, the debate instead essentially involved a more homogeneous sector of intellectuals and particularly literary scholars, and was thus based not upon field studies or moral prejudices, but upon a precise ideological contrast that saw the countryside – in perfect compliance with fascist ideals – as the headquarters of "italianità" or italianness, and of the values that shaped the identity of our people. The city was instead seen as the center of intellectual cosmopolitanism and technological development from which Italian culture could, according to the its position and its specific point of view, either benefit or by which it could be dispersed. Upholders of the so-called "Strapaese"[1] were for the most part connected with the editorial staffs of two journals, Il Selvaggio and L'Italiano, founded respectively in July of 1924 and January of 1926, and both of possessing a clearly fascist orientation. Though the celebration of values linked to the rural dimension was explicit and constant, only sporadically did it accompany attacks or tirades on big city lifestyle, which was, at most, generically accused of giving space to artistic modes, trends, and phenomena of Anglo-Saxon influence: "We alone" – wrote Mino Maccari in 1927 in Il Selvaggio – "as the harmony of our centuries-old cities is disturbed by obscene monuments, and while trends like jazz, condoms, and the sayings of Pittigrilli are taken to the most remote villages, we alone have dared to call our-

selves wild, country, rural, Italian at any cost."[2] On the contrary, big cities were actually indirectly upheld because, above all, they were seen, first, as emblematic of the machine civilization and its dynamic effects upon daily life, which were so dear to the futurists. Second, big cities were considered home to processes of modernization and the freeing from provincialism, much invoked by Bontempelli and the editors of Novecento: a journal founded in 1926, which often referred to the "Stracittà"[3] movement, though it never printed any articles in the defense of metropolitan life, defending at most metropolitan culture.[4]

The difference with the American debate can essentially be explained by the social and intellectual identity of those involved. In the United States, the debate took place between academics and men of the church, established scholars and simple moralists. It resulted in a condemnation of the urban condition which initially proved almost unanimous, as only later was it accompanied, in certain circumstances, by a pure and simple demonization of the metropolis or by an attempt to find solutions to alleviate its harmful effects on the individual. In Italy, the polemic was instead exquisitely intellectual and dealt only with the specific function of the city – positive for some, harmful for others – which allowed certain cultural tendencies to prosper. Thus, in the Italy of the 1920s, a big city was not considered a place of corruption and depravation, a revised and updated version of the ancient Babylon. It was instead a place that at most, according to the editors of Il Selvaggio for example, required purification of certain aspects that risked contaminating the foundations of Italian tradition.

The different nature of this debate and the consequent heterogeneity of its results also had a profound effect upon cinematic representations of the city on the two sides of the ocean. In Hollywood, the celluloid metropolis tended to be infused with a "mystical value," to use the words of James Hay,[5] or in rather absolute terms, primarily as a potential disrupter of ethical, family, and community values. At the end of the 1920s, with the advent of sound, Hollywood studios intensified their production of films belonging to the gangster genre, into which all negative characteristics attributed to the metropolis would soon converge exemplarily: individualism taken to the extreme, greed, violence, illegality, the break-up of the family, sacrificed for luxury and high life. From this perspective, the gangster movie constituted a veritable morality play on the perils of the big city, the dangers hiding behind its allurements, which were even greater when they reached the innocent eyes and ears of newcomers.

It was no coincidence that all gangsters were characterized as Italian or Irish immigrants. As Robert Warshow keenly noted, the gangster is ultimately a tragic hero: his course (a gradual rise, an abrupt and sudden fall) must be emblematic, his end (a violent death with no possibility for redemption or repentance) exemplary, because both must constitute a warning to all those who look to the urban condition with longing or envy.[6] Something analogous was also seen in another genre, the musical, where in these years we can find a condensation of the themes and issues emerging from the debate over the city. There, the problem centered no longer on individual ambition and the anxiety for success, but on the tendency of urban life to fuel, aid, and legitimize behavior focused on transformation, deceptive appearances, and the tendency to take on unsuitable roles. In the end, what is a gangster if not an individual who cannot resist the temptation of wearing the shoes of a rich, successful man, of illegitimately being someone other than himself?

Where sociologists and public morality groups both insisted, though with different

emphases and goals, upon the process of depersonalization that befell those who entered the urban dimension, the musical took the tendency to the extreme, to the threshold of paradox: no longer, or rather not just the spectacle of the city, but the city as spectacle, an object reworked scenographically and choreographically on film. Films like Forty-Second Street (1933) or Gold Diggers of 1935 (1935), which both centered around putting on a show that incorporated the metropolis itself, provided a stylized and concise reading of its architecture and social phenomena. Where the gangster movie took on the role of a moral allegory in respect to the big city and to the negative impulses it provoked in its newcomers, the musical had the task of sublimating discourse on disintegration of individual identity. It set up a narrative, scenographic, and choreographic framework capable of diluting the most dramatic aspects of the question, making them converge into a system where it was all show, and where certain values from the American tradition – such as group spirit enhanced by working together towards a goal – are even accompanied (and spurred on) by a collective tendency towards pretending, staging, interpreting a role. From this perspective, affirmation of the two genres during the first half of the 1930s can also be traced back to their precise value as social and cultural mediator for an audience which, during that time, had a strong need to tame the image of the city and make it readable. This explains, for example, the persistent recourse to stereotypes and symbols seen both in the characters – the gangster and the gold-digger as exponents of metropolitan ambition – and in the iconography: the skyscraper as emblem of the big city, which at that point needed no further localizations.

The urban imaginary of Italian cinema during those years showed entirely different characteristics. As it was not as urgent to narratively or visually mediate the devastating impact of the metropolis on its inhabitants, there were not genres specifically dedicated to that issue, such as the musical or gangster movie. The description of city life, and its eventual contrasting with rural life, was equally present in the two most popular and established genres, the melodrama and especially the comedy. However, neither genre was narratively or thematically characterized by a tendency to polarize discourse on the metropolis around strongly condemning situations in ethical terms, as it did occur in Hollywood. The city remained, like in American cinema, a place of unbridled ambition, of longing for glory and wealth. However, at the same time it was the ideal scenario for transformations, metamorphoses, identity games that led characters to play roles quite distant from their own. Nonetheless, in compliance with the rules of the genre, such tendencies were not always portrayed negatively, and they were rarely accompanied by a tragic epilogue. On one hand there were films like Il signor Max (1937) and Napoli d'altri tempi (1938), in which a protagonist of humble beginnings (a newspaper vendor in the first case, a home house-painter in the second) successfully courts a high society lady, aspiring to establish himself stably in her world. In the film by Camerini, we also see exemplary references to the city (the film is set in Rome) as cosmopolitan, a place pervaded with that the Anglo-Saxon culture which that was detested by the upholders of "Strapaese" and defended by the upholders of "Stracittà."

The story that leads Gianni, the newspaper vendor, to take on the role of Max, an aristocratic gentleman, includes an immersion in American lifestyles: he struggles to stammer out a few words of English; he walks around with a copy of Time or Esquire under his arm; he pretends he knows how to play tennis and bridge. Initially his uncle's admonishments are to no avail in their attempt to bring Gianni back to classical tradition (the summer vacation Gianni's uncle plans for his nephew centers around a visit

to the Parthenon, which will later be sacrificed for a few days in Sanremo in the company of Paola, the noblewoman) and Italian culture (at his uncle's insistence Gianni sings in the tram drivers' company chorus, which we see performing Verdi's Va' Pensiero). The contrasting of the two cultural models accompanies and supports the characterization of the protagonist, who initially, as James Hay keenly noted, "experiences the allure of American modernity", only to gradually become aware of the "reprehensibleness of this desire."[7] Though reprehensible, such ambition is nevertheless easily corrected: Paola's maid, Lauretta, seems to be there on purpose, so that Gianni can finally focus his sentiments on someone of his own level. In the last scene, he takes her to his uncle's house, confirming his return to a familial (as well as social and cultural) environment that seems to definitively reject "American modernity", after having tested out its lack of substance.

With the absence of an exemplarily dramatic ending, Napoli d'altri tempi also provides space to for the repentance of the protagonist. Here, after becoming a famous musician, the protagonist lives a brief romance with a girl from a noble family, only to return to the arms of Ninetta, daughter of fishermen, who had seen him through hard times at the beginning of his songwriting career. Moreover, like in Il signor Max, the protagonist's sentimental curve has both social and cultural implications: the music he writes is popular, drawing on a repertory of traditional Neapolitan music, therefore it requires a cultural background that he can access only through Ninetta – who he runs into again, by no coincidence, at a traditional town festival. In both films, the city is the privileged setting for the aspiration of rising to a higher social class, with all that implies in terms of wealth and prestige, but also in terms of adaptation or change of the characters' original personality. However, the characters' choices do not embody an illegitimate desire, nor a plan doomed to failure. Instead, they represent a perhaps necessary and inevitable phase, which helps the characters to better understand the depth of the values they had hurriedly left behind. As a place where opposites (tradition/modernity, aristocracy/working class, wealth/indigence) coexist, the city helps the main characters to gain personal and cultural enrichment that allows them, as holders of an unusually rich bank of experiences, to make shrewd and well considered life choices.

Such choices can also go the other way: social climbing spurred on by emotions also takes place in Batticuore (1938), set in Paris, and Il carnevale di Venezia (1939), but it ends in matrimony. The main character, female in both films, is courted by a member of the local aristocracy whom she ends up marrying. Once more, the theme of identity plays a crucial role: in Batticuore, the girl is an aspiring thief, enlisted by an ambassador to play the part of a noble woman in a scheme designed to unveil the presumed infidelity of his wife. As such, she makes the acquaintance of a diplomat who falls in love with her and decides to marry her even once he's learned her true identity. In Il carnevale di Venezia, the main character Tonina is an aspiring singer and daughter of musicians. Against her will she agrees to become engaged to a baker, though she is actually dating and in love with a count. Initially, the social distance between the two love- birds seems insurmountable, but – with the aid of a celebration commemorating the Carnival tradition, organized by the local aristocracy and including a singing vocal performance by the girl to be aired over loudspeakers throughout the streets and piazzas – the situation comes together. When the time comes for the girl to sing her song, she is overcome by emotions and cannot get a sound out. Her mother thus takes

her place, and without anyone noticing the switch, gains much acclaim for her performance. While the crowd carries Tonina triumphantly, the mother turns to her husband, the only person who has caught on to the trick, with the words, "Now he'll marry her." In this way, she establishes a strong relationship between her scheme and the happy ending. This relationship could seem implausible, since Tonina's emotions shouldn't, in principle, constitute an obstacle for the count's love. However, such an ending proves instead quite consistent when related to an image of the city not only as a place of social opportunities and changing identities, but also and primarily as a place of possibilities linked to the way opportunities and identities are mutually related. This is an important aspect, because it deals first of all with an attempt on the part of Italian cinema to mediate the audience's relationship with modernity and progress, of which the city will remain the center for all of the 1930s. By confirming a link between technology (the radio), social ambition (the daughter of musicians marries a nobleman), and depersonalization (the girl finds herself, so to say, "borrowing" her mother's voice), and then taking the road to a happy ending, the film somehow confutes the idea that these elements, which belong to the urban dimension, can be harmful to the individual.

At the beginning of Batticuore, there is a very significant scene in this sense. The protagonist has stolen a tie pin from a man standing in front of her on the elevator, and the theft victim is now pursuing her. She seeks shelter in the darkness of a movie theater, and when the man sits down beside her, trying to get his pin back, she begs for pity: "I beg you sir, don't turn me in, I'm lost and alone in this big city," using the same words pronounced onscreen at that very moment by a woman standing before a judge. This scene lends itself to a dual reading. First, it bears witness to an objective affinity between social practices and film content. Second, it refers ironically to the cinematic stereotype of a city that squashes the individual, oppressing and corrupting the weak and defenseless. However, these two aspects are not as contradictory as they may seem, especially considering that the mediation of urban experience constructed by this film, and more generally by Italian cinema of those years, leaned towards a refutation or even a reversal of that stereotype: not only did the big city not oppress individuals, leaving them "lost and alone," it actually allowed them to live a fuller range of experiences, otherwise impossible in small towns or countryside, and, far from corrupting them, it enriched their personalities.

Differently from what happened in Hollywood, representations of the city in Italian cinema of the 1930s were not marked by moral oppositions or by an emphasis on the city's spectacular nature, and this aspect also conditioned the urban iconography. Whereas in the United States, the image of a skyscraper or of a busy street had enough symbolic force to connote the space in a generic yet unequivocal manner, in Italy abstraction of the "big city" was often forgone in favor of a more precise geographic localization of the setting. Rather than being the object of a morally and ideologically oriented discourse, the city had characteristics that coincided with its most famous attractions (Vesuvius and the port for Naples, St. Mark's and narrow streets in Venice, the Cathedral and the fair for Milan). Moreover, when associated with an urban scenario, the spectacular element was never based on stylization, but instead remained solidly anchored to the image of the city and its local traditions. The sequences regarding the festival of the Redentore in Il carnevale di Venezia and the Piedigrotta festival in Napoli d'altri tempi portray places that, by land and by sea, gradually fill with peo-

ple who participate enthusiastically in the festivities. Hence, instead of representing the city as a spectacle celebrated in Hollywood musicals, we have here the spectacle of the city itself, coming to life in a precise manner, marked by a body of rituals and ceremonies that are connected to its past and traditions, and that consequently strengthen its identity.

Thus, in Italian cinema, the urban condition did not necessarily set off a process of depersonalization of individuals, or disintegration of their cultural roots. Even with cosmopolitan air blowing through city streets, it was still possible to take shelter in tradition and history, to which the city was not foreign but an integral part. Naturally, this also relativized the opposition of city and countryside, dissolving the antitheoretical accent between urban modernity and rural tradition that, beyond the echoes produced in magazines, struggled to find solid motivations. To this end, I would like to consider two films that deal with this issue in different ways, and whose results are analogous from a narrative perspective, but entirely opposite in thematic terms.

The first, Il fu Mattia Pascal (1937), opens on an idyllic scene in the countryside: Mattia Pascal and his girlfriend Romilda stretch out in a wheat field, cuddling and speaking of their coming marriage. The strong impression of youth and light-hearted life conferred by these images is reinforced by the following scenes, where we see the male protagonist walking through the fields with a butterfly net (after his identity change into Meis, he speaks of Mattia Pascal as someone who "went butterfly catching"), letting himself go in sudden and instinctive bursts of happiness ("Life is beautiful!," he tells his aunt, who answers him with an insult). However, he is dominated, before and after his wedding, by both his and Romilda's relatives, who consider him irresponsible and incapable of providing for his family. The immaturity of the character, his difficulty with entering into adulthood, is confirmed particularly by his inadequacy at managing money. For example, during his wedding reception, when faced with an insistent merchant asking for payment in full of the champagne bill, he can find no better response than to go to his aunt. Later, when hired by the mayor of Miraglio as the town librarian, he quite gratefully accepts a much lower salary than his predecessor without hesitating. With what follows in terms of individual maturation, the coming of age of For Pascal/Meis is marked by a path that leads him away from the countryside and into the city. First he goes to Monte Carlo where, having won a large sum of money at the gambling-house, he is forced to take some responsibilities, or rather, to make some decisions about how to use the money ("I'll buy back the house, free my wife, and make the old Pescatore my slave"). Rome is next, where the his circumstances force him into a form of community life among the guests in a boarding-house; there he takes part in the small social rites – from meal preparation to séances – that characterize their daily life. For the heterogeneous age and characters of the guests, the microcosm of the boardinghouse seems to refer to the multiform nature of urban life. Indeed, the protagonist experiences urbanity at its worst when, during his stay, he is first tricked and then actually robbed.

Therefore, the individual who later sits on the banks of the Tiber river, meditating seriously on death, or the possibility of "killing" Meis in order to let Pascal live, is a very different person from the one we saw at the beginning who could roll in a wheat field, run through the fields with a butterfly net, and make joyous exclamations on the beauty of life. What differentiates Mattia Pascal from Adriano Meis, beyond the name, is their inner condition: the former was a boy, the latter is a man. We therefore encounter

a change in substance rather than in form, that is made possible by living in the city, depicted here as a place of initiation into the duties (imposed by the community) and the unexpected and malicious events (linked to the centrality of the theme of money) of the adult world.

In the other film, Partire (1938), the protagonist, Paolo, is also trapped within an adolescent condition despite that he lives in Naples, a big city, rather than the countryside. Happily unemployed, Paolo considers work a calamity, and is therefore a prototypical flâneur: he strolls about town with a friend, and favors to go to places like the port and the train station, where ships and trains leave for the exotic places he would like to visit, but that remain inaccessible to him in the absence of a job or salary. The situation changes when he visits the owner of a farm machinery company, in order to return a satchel that the man had lost the night before. The man, amazed by the young fellow's wit but at the same time vexed by his imperviousness to work, comes up with a scheme to hire Paolo. When he finds himself at work for the man, Paolo initially attempts to get himself fired. However, Paolo suddenly wakes up to the work and sacrifices that mark the daily life of farmers when he moves to the countryside, living on a farm that belongs to a man who has decided to buy the farm machinery to speed up his field work. The machinery doesn't arrive as expected, which puts the crops at risk; when the men face the storm to go harvest the wheat, Paolo joins them, proving his maturity, which finally leads him to an awareness of the duties that go along with his condition as an adult man. After his return to the machinery company, he discovers that he has been finally fired; but now, however, he rebels, because he has fully understood the value and meaning of work. His pathway is analogous to that of Pascal/Meis in Chenal's film, but the value attributed to the places has changed radically. In Il fu Mattia Pascal, it is the city, in contrast with the countryside, that constitutes a place of renewal and maturation, while whereas in Partire, the roles are diametrically opposite: only by abandoning the urban space to live in the countryside can the protagonist gain access to adult life.

In the Italian cinema of the 1930s, the framework employed in this last film is in fact the most frequently seen. James Hay has noted how the image of the city as a "gateway to the bel mondo", despite the fascination it usually held over people from the countryside, lacked any "readily identifiable characteristics that audiences could associate with italianità."[8] Nevertheless, it is important to note how films in which the urban image hinged upon cosmopolitanism and the presence of Anglo-Saxon trends and customs were somehow balanced, within national film production during those years, by films – Palio (1932), Il Carnevale di Venezia, Napoli che non muore (1938), Napoli d'altri tempi, just to name a few – where the representation of the city recovered and emphasized the notion of "italianità." These films accomplished "italianità" through storylines full of references to local traditions, from the dialect spoken by the people, to the use of to picturesque locations. This confirms how contrasting city and countryside did not center on a series of well-defined, narrative and figurative oppositions, as in Hollywood films. It instead entered into a more complex and multifaceted discourse that, while linking country life to certain values of Italian culture, still celebrated certain aspects of that same culture that were strictly linked to the history and tradition of Italian cities.

[Translated from Italian by Debra Lyn Christie]

1 Translator's note: "Strapaese," literally "super-country," was a literary movement in Italy during the period following World War I, which was inspired by traditional Italian life and culture and which shunned all aspects of cosmopolitanism and xenophilia.
2 Orco Bisorco, "Gazzettino ufficiale di Strapaese," Il selvaggio, no. 9 (May 15, 1927), p. 33. Here, as on many other occasions, Maccari wrote under a pseudonym.
3 Translator's note: "Stracittà," or "super-city," was an opposing literary movement to "Strapaese," which opened itself to the more modern forms of European culture.
4 In reference to Italian journals of the 1920s and on their role in the cultural panorama of that era, see: Luciano Troisio (ed.), Strapaese e Stracittà (Treviso: Canova, 1975).
5 James Hay, Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 111.
6 Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," in The Immediate Experience (New York: Atheneum, 1970).
7 J. Hay, op. cit., p. 91.
8 Ibid., p. 149