





A failure in resilience: The corrupting influence of postwar Milan in Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*

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Abstract

The 1960 Italian film *Rocco and His Brothers* (*Rocco e i suoi Fratelli*) is one of the greatest exemplars of Italian post-war cinema. The film depicts the disintegration and deterritorialization of an immigrant family from Lucania, a southern Italian village in Basilicata, and their relocation to Milan. The director of the film, Luchino Visconti, continuously alludes to the protagonist's fascination with their hometown (*paese*). This nostalgic and wholesome image of *paese* contrasts the ubiquitous alienation and exploitation in the industrial North. The film is replete with signs and metaphors which explicitly and implicitly reinforce the evident tension between the immigrant family and an industrialized metropolis. Based on an interview with Mario Licari, Visconti's assistant who accompanied him on location visits, this article offers an opportunity to revisit significant locations of the film such as Quartiere Fabio Filzi, the Alfa Romeo Factory, Milan Duomo, Ponte Della Ghisolfia, Parco Sempione, Stazione Centrale and Circolo Arci Bellezza. Underpinned by the theories of Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Gramsci and Andre Bazin this essay creates a theoretical framework that works in parallel with a detailed analysis of the scenes, original archival material, dialogues, places, and history of architecture of the locations. The article demonstrates how urban and architectural spaces not only accommodated the narrative of the film but shaped, twisted and structured the story of the masterpiece. The paper shows how Visconti succeeded in visualizing a 'hidden' Milan that was never appeared on the silver screen before *Rocco and His Brothers*.

Keywords: cinema and city, Luchino Visconti, postwar Milan, film and architecture, Italian cinema.

1. Introduction

Rocco and His Brothers (1960) is an Italian film that tells the story of the Parondis, a family that travels to the industrial North in Milan from the rural Italian South. The film illustrates how Southern Italian traditions are endangered when imported into the modern urban setting during the postwar years. The narrative of *Rocco and His Brothers* is centred around the disintegration and deterritorialisation of the family unit and its traditional values in modern Milan. The Paraondi family cannot come to terms with the inherent social and economic norms of the industrialized city — “the land of opportunities” as it is referred to in the film. The friction between the family and a city that is undergoing sudden societal and economic transformation and development provides a narrative drive for Luchino Visconti in this film. This is underscored by the fascination that the Parondi family has with their *paese* (their small hometown in the South) and the contradictions of South/North and city/country which highlight the traumatic alienation experienced by the immigrant family.

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This film is highly relevant to architecture and urban studies as it provides a highly unique and accurate image of Milan in its phase of transition to accommodate the Economic Miracle. Visconti, himself, had an obsession with Milan and remarked that “there has never been so much of Milan in one film” (Palazzini & Raimondi, 2009, p. 51). This article investigates *Rocco and His Brothers* and examines Visconti’s means of storytelling through his careful selection of urban places throughout postwar Milan. Moreover, these urban and architectural spaces not only accommodate the narrative of the film, but rather they performed as a crucial vehicle which shaped, twisted, and structured this cinematic masterpiece. This research shows how Visconti succeeded in visualizing a ‘hidden’ Milan that never appeared on the silver screen before *Rocco and His Brothers*.

Based on an interview with Visconti’s assistant, Mario Licari, this essay offers an opportunity to revisit locations of the film in Milan such as Quartiere Fabio Filzi, the Alfa Romeo Factory, the Milan Duomo, Ponte Della Ghisolfia, Parco Sempione, Stazione Centrale and Circolo Arci Bellezza in order to understand their significance in the telling of the film’s narrative. Underpinned by concepts from Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Gramsci and Andre Bazin, this article creates a theoretical framework that works in parallel with a detailed analysis of the urban Milanese scenes, original archival material, dialogues, places, and the history of architecture in these locations.

The film entails five chapters, with each one named after one of the brothers in the Parondi family, starting with the eldest son and concluding with the youngest: Vincenzo, Simone, Rocco, Ciro and Luca. Despite this organization of the film, Visconti’s emphasis is on Rocco and Simone, who enter the world of boxing, rather than the brothers who are skilled labourers, Ciro and Vincenzo and the youngest brother, Luca, symbolises the unification of the South/North and workers/peasants. The core of the film is built on the love triangle between Rocco, Simone and the main female character who is a Milanese prostitute, Nadia.

The Lombardian city puts forward two disparate types of scenarios in front of the characters of the films. Vincenzo and Ciro, the labourers, comply with the standards and predefined roles in the city while the two brothers who engage in boxing, Simone and Rocco, become trapped in the labyrinthine pathways, ambitions and complexities of city life. Vincenzo and Ciro integrate into the urban society and seek to fulfil the family’s interests by achieving personal success and making a contribution to the economy of the North. Vincenzo works in the thriving Milanese construction industry and Ciro is a skilled worker in the Alfa Romeo factory—the symbol of progress and modernity. Luca, the youngest brother, wants to follow the journey of Vincenzo and Ciro however not in Milan, but naively in Lucania, the paese after it is “transformed by economic progress within the more prosperous South” (Rohdie, 1992, p. 17).

Rocco and Simone’s experience in Milan contrasts sharply with Vincenzo and Ciro. Rocco and Simone represent the Southern Mediterranean, a world that has no relevance in the modernized city of Milan and does not suit the roles that the city has defined for an immigrant worker. Simone becomes a defeated person who confronts manifold unpleasant encounters under the conditions of metropolitan life; he is corrupted by the city into an instrument for the destruction of the family values, rather than a guardian who maintains them. This occurs not from the lack of will, but from the tragic inappropriateness of his actions. Rocco, a defender of the family and Southern values, is not indifferent to the brutal conditions of everyday life that his family goes through, but his efforts face nothing but failure.

The literary foundations of the film include a novel about Milan, *Rocco: Malavoglia* (1881), by Giovanni Verga along with Antonio Gramsci’s theoretical essay ‘The Southern Question’ (1926). Both texts influenced Visconti vision for the film. (Lima Diego, 2013, p. 52). However, the main source of inspiration is an anthology consisting of nineteen short stories with a sharp focus on Milan, *Il ponte della Ghisolfia* (1958) written by Giovanni Testori (Visconti, Aristarco, & Carancini, 1978, p. 13). Similar to Visconti’s film, the book charts the suburbs of Milan inhabited by the disenfranchised, by the “poor devils who pull the cart in the factory or workshop but also of the idlers ready for anything, prostitutes and hustlers, thieves and pimps with a license to blackmail,

unless there is the right to kill, to aspiring sport stars and turbid nouveau riches.” These characters were part of the Italian population which did not receive the benefits of the Italian Economic Miracle (il boom economico) and were still struggling to survive.

One of the most significant features of the film, and the focus of this article, is the precise study of film locations. During most of Visconti’s visits, he brought along his assistants, Mario Licari and Germano Rumolo and his preferred screenwriter, Suso Checchi D’Amico. For Visconti and his team, the unusually long task of searching and identifying the right locations for Rocco was fundamental to the script. (D’Amico, 2015a). He did not visit different locations to accommodate the story; rather the segments of the narrative of the film were informed by his location visits. Visconti reportedly wrote and even changed the screenplay based on the places he visited. According to Licari, and Caterina D’Amico, the narrative of the film was shaped—and, in instances, radically changed—through a myriad of location visits in the periphery, downtown and even small villages near Milan (D’Amico De Carvalho, 1978, p. 44). Therefore, the importance of the film lies in the fact that it is not only a film about an important city at a crucial period; Rocco and His Brothers is a film that owes its existence to the postwar city, its place and its people.

2. Paese, Metropolis and the Paradoxical Milan

The urbanization of the twentieth century gave rise to a prevailing discourse around the disadvantages of industrial cities and the traditional values of small villages. The dichotomy of city/country was reinforced, on the one side, by the nostalgic and romantic traditions of the pastoral, and on the other side, around the view that values the modernized and industrialized metropolis as a generating “matrix of order” (Wilson, 1992, p. 43). In the opinion of the defenders of this ‘new order,’ the metropolis had the potential to “emancipate the working class and allow women to uphold and contribute to bourgeois domestic ideas” (AlSayyad, 2006, p. 6) (Wilson, 1992, pp. 16-25).

For Visconti, a metropolis is a purely paradoxical entity; emancipatory and fettering, kindly and hostile, advantageous and destructive. Although the film is a tragedy associated with the experience of the modern city, Visconti’s depiction of Milan is quite oxymoronic and sees the city as a heterotopia. Visconti shows the dark, dirty, smoky and foggy city, which is full of crime, gambling, prostitution, violence and disdain but at the same time presents the possibilities and opportunities of a new modern world that the city offers to the family.

Visconti criticises the celebrated yet hegemonic Taylorist system and the work ethics of Milanese industry. Film theorist John Foot describes Visconti’s Milan as a place in which “you have to be willing to work hard, to make sacrifices, to be humiliated, to be humble, to be mediocre to become integrated.” (Foot, 1999, p. 215) Indeed, in one of the film dialogues, Simone refers to Milan as a place in which one needs to be “poisoned” and “work like an animal.”

Other Visconti films are imbued with an explicit obsession with the image and memory of the countryside (paese) in the South—or as it is referred to in the film— terra di primavera. This fascination that Visconti and his characters have with the agrarian culture contrasts with the sequence of nightmare scenarios that Rocco, Simone and their family experience. While the allusions to the enchantment and glamour of paese and the South conform to the nostalgic memories of an ideal place, the everyday life of the characters in Milan is an introduction to the complexities of modernity for Rocco’s family.

Similar to Visconti, other post-war Italian filmmakers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini drew upon the nostalgia of the lost values of paese. The humanity and warmth that is forever gone and destroyed by neo-capitalism and neo-bourgeoisie within the modern city. For Neorealist and post-war Italian filmmakers, the cultural change was not a problem in itself. What they tried to emphasize was that

the cultural connection with the original terra (land) was lost and contaminated by the “corruption” and “impurity” of the urban middle-class culture. (Pasolini, 2013).

Despite all of the dystopic images and descriptions and the profound regret for the lost land (terra) and the paese, Milan was at times depicted as a generous city in Rocco; it was the land of opportunities that accommodated the Economic Miracle. In one interview, Visconti described Milan as “the Australia of Italy” and stated that the Milan in the film was “not only hospitable [but] also generous” (Palazzini & Raimondi, 2009, p. 51) (Visconti, p. 73). In the words of one of his characters, Milan is a city where its “mayor does not leave anyone in the middle of the street.”

The alienation and corruption in Milan is represented by Simone, the second eldest brother, who becomes a boxer but is led astray by an obsessive passion for a Milanese prostitute called Nadia. The relationship between Simone and Nadia epitomises the impossible reconciliation between the Southern family and a city which is willing to compromise its values and trade its humanity for economic benefit. According to Licari, the first version of the screenplay had Nadia as Simone’s fiancé from Lucania, the southern hometown of the Parondis. However, during the visit to the Fabio Filzi Housing Quarter (Quartiere Fabio Filzi), Visconti decided that Nadia should be a Milanese woman who symbolised Milan and countered Simone; a character who cannot integrate into the metropolitan society.

Notions such as honour, family, brotherhood and solidarity contrast the values of the city and become uncontrollable sources of predicament. Yet the destruction of the Parondi family is caused not only by the contradictions between the values of the countryside and the city. The city itself, its circumstances and hidden layers that are represented by the characters and their actions lead to the fall of the family. For example, Nadia represents the exploitation and commercialisation of the clandestine sex market in the city and attacks the family on their arrival in Milan, while Morini, the rich entrepreneur of the boxing club, metaphorically points out the casino-like economy of the metropolis. These negative facets of Milan contrast with the bucolic images we imagine according to the ideal and wholesome descriptions of the South by the Parondis; a land of fresh air, sun and sea — “moonbeams and rainbows” in the words of Rocco in a scene that was meant to be shot in the Southern town of Matera (I Sassi), but never eventuated. (Foot, 1999, p. 220). Instead, Visconti allowed the audience to simply imagine a rural southern utopia based on the Parondi family descriptions, rather than film one and risk showing the audience the actual poverty of that location.

3. The body of the city

Understanding the political landscape of post-war Italy and the South/North tension is an indispensable element to perceive the image of Milan in the film. In this regard, both theoretical and literal sources that led to the production of Rocco, as well as the socio-political debates around the films, are to be taken into consideration.

Rocco the film is premised on Giovanni Verga’s Rocco: Malavoglia (1881), Giovanni Testori’s Il ponte della Ghisolfa (1958) and Antonio Gramsci’s ‘The Southern Question’ (1926). These texts draw on a series of dichotomies such as family and society, peasant and worker, and North and South. Visconti regarded ‘The Southern Question’ (c. 1927) posed by Gramsci as the main theoretical source for Rocco and remarked: “I have always seen ‘The Southern Question’ as one of the principal sources of my inspiration for Rocco and His Brothers” (Visconti, 1960, p. 12).

Gramsci’s essay theorizes that the notion of class exploitation can be understood as a kind of “urban exploitation” and is a radically “geographical” and “urban” issue (Gramsci, 1978, pp. 283, 343, 350). For him, class exploitation led by the “urban petite bourgeoisie” is redefined and somewhat facilitated in the northern cities when the peasants of the south become the workers of the north (Gramsci, 1978, p. 343) (Rosengarten, 2013, p. 61) (Rohdie, 1992, p. 13). He called for the

alliance between the Southern peasants and the Northern workers under the leadership of the Communist Party, a unification that is symbolised by Vincenzo, Ciro and Luca in the film.

In 1971, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben published a crucial relevant piece in relation to the classic masterpiece in *Il Manifesto* that is rarely discussed. The article, 'The Death of Lives; Deprived of Politea' ('Morto dei Vivi: Deprivati di Politea'), appears to be an early version of an idea that was later developed in Agamben's well-known text *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Agamben argues that the situation of the Southern immigrants is close to political and social death. In the essay, Agamben explicates that a human is not only a natural biological body that lives and survives but also the 'body of city', a 'political body'.

Borrowing the notions of 'banned from the city' and 'deprived of the city' from ancient Rome, he elucidates that Simone and Rocco, as representatives of the Southern immigrants, are deprived three times. First, they are deprived of their terra and this is why Northern people call them *terrone*—people who left their land (*terra*), the Southern land. Second, they are excised from their "cultural personae and identity" which has its roots in their previous land (Agamben, 1971, p. 4). They are expected to behave and conform with Northern metropolitan culture. This disconnect with the cosmopolitan Milanese culture is evident in several dialogues in the film. For instance, Ginetta, Vincenzo's girlfriend, says to Vincenzo "Can't you understand that we're not in Lucania anymore?" Finally, according to Agamben, the brothers are banned from Milan, simply because they are *terrone* and come from the South.

In fact, Rocco and Simone surrender their 'body to the city' and only participate by fighting/boxing with their 'natural body'. The exclusion and alienation of Rocco's family is repeated in the film and there are many scenes in which they are called *terrone*. Cecchi, the boxing trainer, remarks: "you are *terrone*, they are right! You don't understand anything. You can't learn anything. Uncivilized! Undisciplined people!" or in another scene, when the Parondis first enter their home in the basement of a building in *Quartiere Fabio Filzi*. The doorkeeper calls them in an insulting manner 'African,' as outsiders and foreigners, which negating a valid connection to Italy.

4. Milan: images and places of oblivion

Architectural historian Alfredo Ronchetta asserts that *Rocco and His Brothers* is a unique cinematic example that addresses different aspects of everyday life in a city that is in a phase of transformation: new industries, labour conditions, housing problems, control and discipline, generation gaps and social unrest and oblivion (Ronchetta, 2007, p. 124). However, the film is not about any of the singular issues, it is about the "unseen reality" of Milan itself (Ronchetta, 2007, p. 124).

According to filmmaker and film historian Chale Nafus, *Rocco and His Brothers* was the first Italian film that had "a wide international audience" and Visconti was acclaimed for depicting a hidden Milan and the dark side of the 'capital of the miracle' (Nafus, 2019). Nonetheless, the realistic gaze of Visconti on Milan and his loyalty to real locations resulted in an unwelcome image of the city that was boycotted and censored, particularly by journalists and the Italian government.

The cinematic reflection of the “moral capital city” of Italy and the “archetype of Italian modernity” sparked a strong wave of fierce criticism from Italian critics and journalists (Rabissi, 2019, p. 1084) (Nafus, 2019). The Italian newspaper *Avanti!* denounced Rocco as “destroy[ing] the myth of the big city of general progress and wellbeing” (“Rocco e I Suoi Fratelli,” 1960, p. 9). Another newspaper *L'Unità*, criticised Rocco, claiming that the film put a spotlight on only the “dark zones of our social and civil life” and “uncover[s] what was rotten” (“Visconti? A Vero Milanese?,” 1960, p. 3).



Figure 1 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo)

The relentless pressure of local authorities forced Visconti to shoot some of the scenes elsewhere. For example, the scene of Nadia’s murder was originally intended to be shot alongside one of Milan’s canals (navilgli) but the provincial authorities refused Visconti’s permission as they were afraid that “a scene involving murder and prostitution would be bad for tourist development in the area” (Rohdie 1992, 11). Ultimately the scene was shot in Lago Fogliano in the province of Latina in the Lazio region. (Figure 1)



Figure 2 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

Visconti insisted on several cinematic strategies to draw a realistic image of the city which did not correspond with how Milan was portrayed in other media at the time. In 1959, Visconti and Giuseppe Rotunno, the director of cinematography, were able to shoot the film in colour, however they made a deliberate choice to use black and white as Visconti and Rotunno believed this is “how a Southern Immigrant sees the city” (Rohdie, 1992, p. 9). The city was always filmed with high contrast and the interiors are shot with low-key lighting. Almost all the significant scenes of the film take place during the night or in dark interiors: the arrival of the family, boxing fights, the scene in which Simone rapes Nadia, etc. The only bright, thoroughly lit and fully exposed scene in the film is the last scene where Luca, the character who represents a bright future, meets his brother in front of the Alfa-Romeo factory. (Figure 2)

In the Duomo scene, although set in the daytime, we see the high angle of the satanic and grey city filmed from an exaggerated perspective which is the picture of the emotional predicament of Rocco and Nadia. (Figure 3)



Figure 3 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

What is remarkable about *Rocco and His Brothers* is the fact that its script is driven by the locations visited by Visconti and his team; critical places that inform the structure of the film that included: Parco Sempione, in front of Ponte delle Sirente (Ghisini sisters) — the location of Rocco's daily training — the Standa building in downtown where Vicenzo meets Ginetta in its backyard and Unione Sportiva Lombarda in Via Giovanni Belleza. (Figure 4)



Figure 4 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

The first boxing battle takes place in Opera Nazionale Balilla, a building in Via Pietro Mascagni designed by the rationalist architect, Mario Cereghini. The second boxing fight (in which Simone is defeated) and the third (the first win of Rocco) occur in Teatro Principe in via Bligny. The final boxing fight in which Rocco wins was filmed in Palazzetto dello Sport designed by Paolo Vietti Violi (1925) in Piazza Febbraio (Fiera Campionaria) in front of the entrance of Piazzale Giulio Cesare. Two crucial locations at the beginning of the film and discuss how the places contributed to the cinematic image of Milan that Visconti intended to build.

4.1. Stazione Centrale and the Tram Journey



Figure 5 Opening Title. Screenshot from Rocco and His Brothers. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

From the first moment of the film, Visconti attempts to visualize the striking tension between the family and the city. The opening of the film is the arrival of the Parondi at the railway station, Milano Centrale, which is situated in the city centre of Milan. The film opens with a long shot of Milano Centrale and the film audience hears the song My Beautiful Village (Bel Paese Mio) by the well-known composer Nino Rota, with lyrics by G. Giagni, and performed by Elio Mauro. (Figure 5) The song foreshadows the main theme of Visconti's film, the nostalgia of paese and the struggle in the city. The song, with lyrics describing the nostalgic longings for home, is in the dialect of Basilicata, the southern Italian region in Lucania that the Parondis arrive from

*"Quanto è grande il mondo (How big the world is)
La strada è lunga assai (The road is very long)
Non pigli il sonno (non prendi sonno) (do not sleep)
Bel paese mio Dove sono nato Il mio cuore per te l'ho lasciato (My beautiful country, where I was born,
and where I left my heart)"*

The long shot of the deep, gigantic and monumental structure of Milano Centrale contrasts with the song about paese. Visconti encapsulated the essence of his narrative in this contradiction which is revealed in the opening of the film. The prison-like Milano Centrale, as depicted by Visconti, is an emblematic representation of Visconti's idea of "cage-city". (Palazzini & Raimondi, 2009, p. 55) In the scene of Milano Centrale we see Rosaria, the mother, with Simone, Rocco, Ciro, Luca and their eldest brother, while Vincenzo is already in Milan, celebrating his engagement to Ginetta, also from a family of Southern migrants but well-established in Milan. The family exits from the western staircases of Milano Centrale, towards Piazza Duca d'Aosta.

The family catches tram number 23, which travels from Stazione Centrale to the outer suburb of Lambrate. (Figure. 6 - 7) This scene is one of the very first moments we see the alienation of the Paraondis in Milan. Apart from the difference in accent revealed in the dialogues, an audience immediately realizes that Rosaria is not familiar with the jargon of urban life and terms used for public transportation. When the tram driver uses the term capolinea (the Italian term for terminus), Rosaria does not grasp the term and the tram driver needs to repeat it again and explain "last stop; where the tram cannot go any further."



Figure 6 Screenshot from Rocco and His Brothers. (Goffredo Lombardo.)



Figure 7 Screenshot from Rocco and His Brothers. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

As the film historian Gian Pier Brunetta wrote “the repetition of the words is a sign of an absolute estrangement between the two worlds of the nearly galactic distance between them . . . to communicate they are reduced to single words, gestures, and photographs” (Brunetta, 2001, p. 88). On the tram journey, Simone is amazed by the illuminated shops and tells Rocco, “It is not clear whether it is day or night”. Viewing a city that is lavishly lit at night through the windows of a moving machine (the tram) is a totally unprecedented experience for the family and it is their first encounter with the unfamiliar environment of the Milanese metropolis.

4.2. Quartiere Fabio Filzi

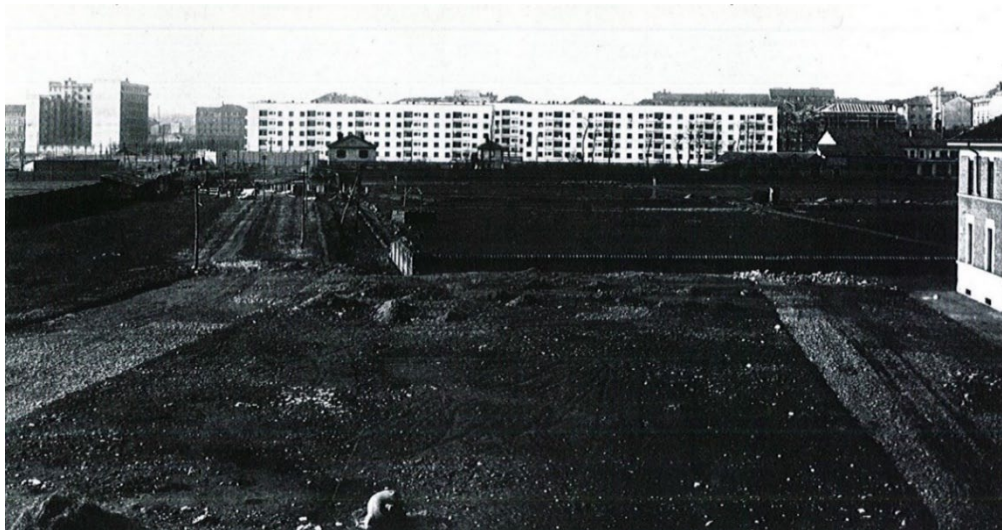


Figure 8 Quartiere Fabio Filzi. Photograph by Giuseppe Colonese. 1940. (Archivio CFP Bauer, Milano.)

The Quartiere Fabio Filzi, the first dwelling of the Parondi family, plays a key role in the film. The Fabio Filzi neighborhood was a series of public housing apartment blocks designed by the young architect Franco Albini and his colleagues Renato Camus, Giancarlo Palanti. They were the winner of a social housing competition announced by Istituto Fascista Case Popolari (IFACP) in 1932. The group of architects first met in the office of the anti-academy and Modern movement adherent

magazine, Casabella, and were early proponents of Italian rationalist architecture as an association with the international style of the modern architecture movement. (Figure 8 - 9)



Figure 9 Quartiere Fabio Filzi. Photographer unknown, Renato Camus and Giancarlo Palanti. 1939. (Biblioteca comunale Paolo Borsellino, Como.)

Quartiere Fabio Filzi was constructed in two stages in 1937 and 1938 (Prina, 2006, p. 2). According to architecture historian Raffaele Pugliese, Quartiere Fabio Filzi was a revolutionary exercise in the period of Italian rationalist architecture and its public housing projects (Pugliese, 2005, p. 17). The project became an exemplar for other social housing projects amongst other Italian architects in the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, the design language, spatial arrangement and use of materiality in this project were reiterated in other projects by Albini. (Figure 10 - 11)



Figure 10 Site Perspective. By Franco Albini, Renato Camus and Giancarlo Palanti. 1935. (Archivio Fondazione Franco Albini, Milan.)



Figure 11 Quartiere Fabio Filzi. Photographer unknown, Renato Camus and Giancarlo Palanti. 1939. (Biblioteca comunale Paolo Borsellino, Como.)

The site plan of all of the projects encompasses two lines of buildings in parallel with one another, based on a north-south axis. In Fabio Filzi there are two types of buildings: four and five-story buildings incorporating three units on each floor and two units in the basement. This type of organisational strategy was adopted by other important social housing projects such as CIAM:

Milano Verde, Quattro Citta Sateliti and Piano A.R in Milan, Piacenza, Novara, Torino, Besnate and Genova.

In his 1939 Casabella article, 'An Oasis of Order', the architectural critic Giuseppe Pagano considered Quartiere Fabio Filzi as an influential moment in public housing in Italy. Fabio Filzi was the first public housing project in Italy, according to Pagano, that prioritized the "life quality of working-class users" and integrated a "new order" into the chaotic form of Milan's urban context (Pagano, 1939, p. 8). He claims that the neighborhood was intended to accommodate immigrant working-class people coming from small towns of the South and its "order, geometrical simplicity and functionalism" was meant to prepare them to accept the order of their new urban environment of Milan. (Figure 12)

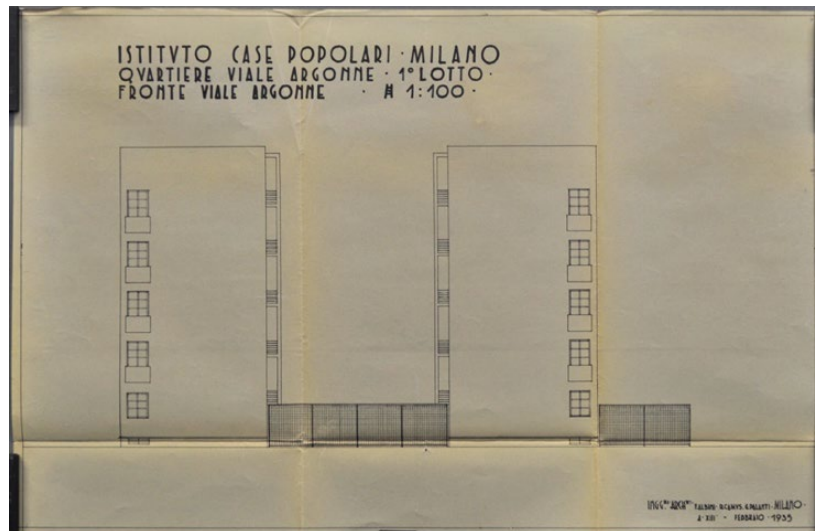


Figure 12 Elevation. By Franco Albini, Renato Camus and Giancarlo Palanti. 1935. (Archivio Fondazione Franco Albini, Milan.)

He writes:

[I]n the confusing mosaic of dwellings in Milan, the Fabio Filzi quarter represents an extremely rare exception. Houses open on all sides instead of the barracks with closed courtyards; the house made for the health of inhabitants to act as sidewalk screens; houses well aligned and rationally arranged in a harmonious and disciplined composition instead of the usual sampling of twentieth-century gaudiness (Pagano, 1939, p. 8-9)

In an interview with the authors, Mario Licari explains how Visconti chose this location and how the architectural attributes of the location contributed to the story of the film:

In the first version of the screenplay, there was another character named Imma, instead of Nadia, who was a girl from Lucania and ex-fiancee of Simone, who afterwards falls in love with Rocco. We visited the location, Quartiere Fabio Filzi, (on September 4, 1958, based on my notes) and I think, there, Visconti decided to change the character of Imma to Nadia. Visconti was not happy with the idea that Imma is a southern girl. He thought the encounter with the character must be something generated by life in Milan, or someone substantially from Milan, a phenomenon produced by Milan and related to "vivere in citta" (living in city). In the last version of the script, Nadia is from Cremona, a village close to Milan... While visiting the location of Quartiere Fabio Filzi, which was suggested by Ferdinando Giovannoni, the assistant to set designer Mario Garbuglio. In the backyard, I remember very well, I was with Visconti, Giovannoni, Enrico Medioli [co-screen writer] and Rumolo Germano, another Visconti's assistant, and Giuseppe Rotunno, the cinematographer, was behind us and was taking some photos. Visconti was explaining that he was doing two things. First, he was revising the story of Imma and in the meantime, he was trying to make the story of Rocco closer to the story of Joseph in the Bible to make, in his opinion, a more Biblical film. He said that we should rethink the role of this girl (Imma), as she is probably the most

important element of this tragedy. I think in the Bible there is something that can be represented by the girl, there is that corrupting element also in the story of Joseph. Visconti was explaining the character of Imma and we were on the staircase that goes to the basement (the selected location) of the third building on the right hand where you turn to the left from the main entrance of Via Birago. Visconti said, the girl should not be from the South, should be someone from Milan or Lombardy, for example, should be the product of this system, should come from this environment, exactly from somewhere like here (Visconti was impressed by the location). For example, they [the Parondi] could come across her here, exactly here, in this staircase and said ecco [that is it], here would be fantastic and called Rotunno to explain to him. (Figure 13)



Figure 13 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

In 1995, Caterina D'Amico, the daughter of Visconti's screenwriter Suso Cecchi D'Amico published Visconti's notes and letters and some tapes recorded in Visconti and His Life and Work. D'Amico transcribed a tape recording sent by Visconti to her mother, Visconti's screenwriter on 14 September 1958 (ten days after Visconti's visit to Fabio Filzi). The recording tape entails Visconti's thoughts about the story of *Rocco and His Brothers*. In a segment of the tape Visconti talks about the character of Imma and his site visit to Quartiere Fabio Filzi:

The character of the girl for us could be, obviously on another level, the city; Milan which is the girl, the corruption. The girl should be the symbol of the city and like the city, she does not have a label that I am a corrupting person; cannot be a peasant from the South. It should be a modern thing, an urban thing; for example, a mannequin? story of a mannequin with a background, an extended family, brother, sisters, kids ... This is why I am thinking of different characters; a nurse? A worker? From Milan?, or I do not know, maybe a foreigner but working in Milan for many years! Anyway, I found also another surprising fact in all the crimes, in all the strange stories that have taken place in Italy: there is always a prostitute and this is an Italian reality. (D'Amico De Carvalho, Marzot, & Tirelli, 1995, p. 53)



Figure 14 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

As the transcribed tape recording from Visconti reveals, for him, the character of the prostitute, Imma, representing the de-humanizing nature of the city is not a popolana in Neorealist films. (Figure 14) Similar to a generous number of Italian films in 50s and 60s she might be a prostitute but that is the only common feature. Imma does not possess the attributes of a quintessential

popolana, a strong woman with a “victim status” who “struggles with the problems of daily life” as appears in Neorealist films (Charitonidou, 2022, p. 8). This character is meant to personify the gradual corruption the city inflicted onto the family. In the same recording tape, Visconti speaks about the Quartiere Fabio Filizi and how he imagined the Parondi family meeting Imma there:

We visited some buildings somewhere close to Ortica which is supposed to be the location of their first apartment, in the basement. You should see the place; it is sad and gloomy; white boring buildings close to each other, very sad and upsetting. That is one of the social housing apartments which is just enough to live in. All of the inhabitants are workers, from the South, Varese, Lecco, Como even foreigners live there but they all live miserable life. I said to Rumolo that maybe it is not a bad idea that Imma meets them there, a prostitute who is escaping from someone or by chance, or who knows how. They can meet when they arrive. (D'Amico De Carvalho et al., 1995, p. 53)

The interview with Licari and the archival material discloses an evident discord between Visconti's description of the buildings and the way in which architectural media praised the project. In Visconti's comments, and in the scene itself, a clear chasm between what the piece of architecture was intended to do and the real experience it provides is obvious. The selection of the location and the way in which it is portrayed clarifies that what moulded and drove the work of Visconti is his obsession with the ‘reality’ of places. The approach taken by Visconti is a sign of loyalty and a “return” to Neorealist cinema which—as Bazin put it—is founded on the basis of the creation of “a universe that is not metaphorical and figurative but spatially real” (Bazin, 1967, p. 19).

Although *Rocco and His Brother* is too “operatic” and “star-driven” to match the formal and aesthetic criteria of Neorealist films, it is an exemplary model of Neorealism in its content and method of ideation and production (Nafus, 2019). The film entails all the features of the Neorealist films: tells the story of “the victims of society”, gives voice to “the lower classes, workers and peasants”, addresses “the polarity between northern and southern Italy” and, most importantly, configures a narrative that is “spatially real” (Author, 2011) (Vitti, 1996, p. XXIII) (Charitonidou, 2022, p. 2) (Bazin, 1967, p. 19).

Rocco and His Brothers is made in the same period as other Neorealist films such as *Il Posto* (Ermanno Olmi, 1961), *Una Storia Milanese* (Eriprando Visconti, 1962), and *Il Disordine* (Franco Brusati, 1961). The group of films had a remarkable influence on “the production and perception” of the image of post-war Milan (Rabissi, 2019, p. 1094). Nevertheless, Visconti's somewhat obsessive ‘spatial realism’ and his ‘surgical location scouting’ resulted in an image of Milan that was fundamentally different from what people expected to see on the silver screen.

4.3. TV and Renaissance paintings

While *Rocco and His Brothers* is seen as a film about paradoxical Milan and the events that take place in its urban spaces, one of the most vital scenes of the film that reveals the message behind Visconti's masterpiece is an enigmatic interior scene. The interiors in *Rocco and his Brothers* are mostly flat, dark, empty and lit by artificial light. The only interior scene saturated with details, objects and decorations is the interior of Morini's house, the boxing club owner. An affluent man with a strong Milanese accent, he is one of the corrupting figures in the story and pays for Simone's gambling, sex and alcohol. In the scene, Morini tries to seduce Simone and finally, Simone and Morini end up hitting each other. Before their conflict in the room, Morini switches on the TV and on the screen appears five Renaissance paintings that, as Visconti stated, summarize the message of the film (D'Amico, 2015b). Licari remarked that the act of placing the paintings on the TV screen through the means of trucage and visual effects took more than two months. Due to time and

financial constraints, Visconti's producer tried to dissuade him from the scene but Visconti believed the paintings are crucial to the film. (Figure 15 - 16)



Figure 15 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)



Figure 16 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

The five paintings on the screen are *Saint George and the Dragon* (1504–1506) and *Vision of a Knight* (1504–1505) by Raphael, *Danae* (1553–1554) by Titian, *The Tempest* (1508) by Giorgione and *The Fall of Man* (1550) by Titian. All the paintings feature a male and female protagonist that probably represents Rocco (or Simone) and Nadia. The paintings recount the concepts narrated by the story of the film, tragic notions such as sexuality, sin, temptation, conflict and descent; alongside an incessant battle and predicament all accompanied by a highlighted tempting female figure with a strong influence on the male protagonist. (Figure 17 - 18)



Figure 17 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)



Figure 18 Screenshot from *Rocco and His Brothers*. (Goffredo Lombardo.)

While we can only speculate, we can begin to surmise the motivations behind Visconti's obsession and focus on this scene as communicating the message of the film. In this scene, he has strategically combined two very different modes of media, two different ways of communicating stories—Renaissance painting and television—one old, and one new. The act of viewing Renaissance painting on the new medium of the television can be a metaphor for the Parondi family and their transplantation into the Rationalist housing within the bustling modern metropolis of Milan.

While we can observe a painting on television, just as the Parondi family can physically move their bodies to the city (in the Agamben sense), for both the Parondis, and in the viewing of Renaissance paintings, something very real and authentic is lost, something that Benjamin would describe as aura at least in the case of works of art. What Visconti may have been trying to communicate with this scene is that for the Parondis, and perhaps for Italy, all of the supposed benefits of postwar modernization brought about through the Economic Miracle, manifest within the city of Milan, comes at a cost, a cost which is the loss of an [mostly] agrarian culture with traditional values from Southern Italy.

5. Conclusion

The 1960 Italian film *Rocco and His Brothers* (*Rocco e i suoi Fratelli*) depicts the disintegration and deterritorialization of an immigrant family from Southern Italy to Milan. In the film, Visconti, continuously alludes to the nostalgic and wholesome image of paese which contrasts with the ubiquitous alienation, exploitation, and paradoxical nature of Milan. The signs and metaphors in the film explicitly and implicitly reinforce the evident tension between the Southern Italian immigrant family and an industrialized northern metropolis.

By investigating the testimony of Visconti's assistant Mario Licari, this article was able to meaningfully revisit locations such as Quartiere Fabio Filzi, the Alfa Romeo Factory, the Milan Duomo, Ponte Della Ghisolfa, Parco Sempione, Stazione Centrale and Circolo Arci Bellezza in order to understand their significance in the telling of the film's narrative. Concepts from Gramsci and Agamben create a theoretical framework that works in parallel with a detailed analysis of the urban Milanese scenes, original archival material, dialogues, places, and the history of architecture in these locations. Gramsci points out that class exploitation occurs at the level of the city, that it is in fact a geographic, indeed urban phenomenon. We understand from Agamben how the problems facing Rocco and his family original from spatial and geographic territory include being shunned from the city and deprived of *la terra*, and their cultural identity, which is tied to the land. Visconti is able to illustrate the theories of Gramsci while using well-known Milanese sites as vehicles for storytelling. In the final scenes we see Visconti engaging with new types of postwar media in the form of the television shows us that while the medium may change and advance technologically, tragic stories such as *Rocco and his Brothers* are eternal.

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Resume

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