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Topic: What does American reception to *Il Posto* (dir. Olmi) reveal about the influence (or lack thereof) of leftist ideology in the post-war American zeitgeist?

Research: ProQuest and Shapiro Library

Significance: Understanding how the American public's received foreign, leftist art can give better insight into the political actions of the nation in the years following.

A Taste of Your Own Medicine: American Capitalism in Italy

The year is 1961, Italy's "Economic Miracle" is in full swing, and the suddenly industrious nation is enjoying economic growth the likes of which it has never since seen. Millions of southerners are migrating north to escape the trappings of rural, agricultural work in favor of the newfound industry in cities like Milan and Rome. Italy has become one of the western world's most prosperous nations, a country that only years before was in a state of literal ruin. The Marshall Plan, a post-war American strategy using economic support to secure the allegiance of non-communist western nations, seems to be working despite the Italian Communist Party exercising considerable influence. Not everyone is so happy about these changes in Italian society, however. Many, such as director Ermanno Olmi, see in this new society industrial isolation and alienation, as he turns a critical eye on the condition of modern corporate life in his first feature-length film, *Il Posto* (1961).

Olmi's film features a working-class youth named Domenico who lives with his family in the outskirts of Milan. It has been decided that Domenico will forego furthering his education in favor of entering the corporate world, where he will gain life-long employment and a steady, if

perhaps modest, wage. Quickly, Domenico finds himself traversing the empty, boundless corridors of modern office buildings, accompanied at his work by impersonal bureaucrats who seem to have had an ounce of individuality drained from them. Despite meeting his love interest early in the film, the longer he is employed, the harder it becomes for Domenico to reconnect with her. Indeed, throughout the film, Olmi seems to present a corporate world where human connection and empathy do not exist, and one is meant to only be a cog in the machine—"a vision that could well have been created by a Marxist rather than a director with deep Catholic convictions" (Bondanella, 2009: 227)¹¹.

Two years later, on the 22nd of October 1963, *Il Posto*, or as it would be referred to during its American distribution, *Sound of Trumpets*, began playing across the United States in art house theatres. From Boston to New York, to Cincinnati to Los Angeles, critics agreed upon the film's merits as a beautiful piece of storytelling and applauded Olmi's debut feature-length film. However, critics did not reach a consensus concerning the tone and message of the film. Interestingly, though perhaps not shockingly, critical reception and interpretation of the film varied from region to region. From the Northeast to the Midwest, regional cultural considerations impacted how moviegoers received the film, and from this, we can gain insight into how leftist ideology, an undeniably massive component of Italian cinema, did or did not influence the post-war American zeitgeist.

We'll begin our critical exploration in Boston, Massachusetts; one of America's oldest, historically (Irish) catholic cities, and the capital city of a state long known to be a national stronghold for left-wing politics in America. As the film reaches its conclusion, and Domenico is promoted from errand boy to the clerkship he had hoped to attain from the onset of the picture,

¹ Bondanella, Peter. "A History of Italian Cinema." Book. New York: Continuum, 2009.

Melvin Maddocks of the Christian Science Monitor notes, “Even when he leaves the long white corridors of the office where he begins as a uniformed messenger, the lessons of the boys’ individual unimportance mock him,” (Maddocks, 1963: 4)². Going further still, Maddocks comments, “Mr. Olmi has dramatized nothing less than the process by which living, breathing individuals may be reduced to a punch card in the electronic brain of a personnel computer,” and it would seem truly picks up on the humanist message behind Olmi’s film. In his review, Maddocks acknowledges the dehumanization of Domenico and his coworkers at the hand of



Sandro Panzeri in a scene from 'The Sound of Trumpets,' known in Europe as 'Il Posto' (The Job)

their employers, at one point calling the narrative ‘Kafkaesque’; certainly not painting a positive image of Olmi’s depiction of corporate capitalism. In perhaps his most decidedly leftist comment, Maddocks quotes Carl Jung saying, “Resistance to the organized mass can be effected only by the man who is as well organized in his individuality as the mass itself”” seeming to say

² Maddocks, Melvin. "Sound of Trumpets!" *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908-), Oct 24, 1963

that through the company keeps its employees complacent in their mediocre lives by stripping them of their individuality and humanity.

Another critic, writing for the *Boston Globe*, did not in the film see such a grim tale. The author acknowledges the misfortune of Domenico's position and how this resonates with the audience; "you realize he would wish to continue his studies but is resigned to becoming a wage-earning in his lower middle-class family," (*Boston Globe* 1964: 8)³. They even go on to say that it is in the clerical position Domenico finds himself at the end of the film that he will "probably end his days." Despite this though, they conclude their review by saying, "It is a picture which will please men and women of maturity, remembering their own early struggles." This comment reveals a deeper misunderstanding of the film's humanist message. Domenico is presented with essentially no lateral mobility within the company; the film itself concludes with a scene of long-employed clerks arguing over who will take the frontmost desk, a hint that this was the only "promotion" they could ever get. The idea that well-to-do adults would see the film as a reminder of their younger selves implies that Domenico is set to follow down their same path and find prosperity too in his future; an idea which insinuates that the film itself contains a message promoting the "American Dream" than it is criticizing it.

Departing Boston and moving down the East Coast to New York City, *Il Posto* began its stateside theatrical run at a time when art house theatres were struggling to fill seats. Bosley Crowther explains why this is in a piece for the *New York Times*, noting that "the art-film audience is not responding the way it did to the modest or off-beat little pictures when there were fewer of them around," (*New York Times* 1963: 193)⁴. *Il Posto* was no different, as Crowther

³ "Italian Youth Superb in 'Sound of Trumpets'." *Boston Globe* (1960-), Feb 03, 1964.

⁴ By, BOSLEY CROWTHER. "TOO MANY, TOO FEW: NOT ENOUGH ART FILMS FOR HOST OF THEATERS." *New York Times* (1923-), Dec 01, 1963.

writes, “*Sound of Trumpets*, a modest but fine Italian film...died dismally this month at Cinema II and at the Fifth Avenue Cinema, despite some glowing but properly cautioning reviews. It simply did not draw walk-ins.” By and large, college students and young people were the target audience for art-house cinema; looking to go against mainstream Hollywood productions, and leading them to embrace foreign, specifically European cinema. While these audiences may have appreciated the political sentiments of these films, something that was virtually non-existent in American productions, it was not their primary reason for moviegoing, and an oversaturation of these films made them lose their novelty in the eyes of their audience.

Crowther himself was a big fan of *Il Posto*, writing about it on multiple occasions and perhaps the most of any American critic at the time. In his review, Crowther sings the film’s praises, and in a later column even named it to be one of his top films of 1963 (Crowther 1963: 47)⁵. Crowther appreciates the humanist nature of the film and describes how Olmi captures a

“profound comprehension of [Domenico], of his anxieties, fears and excitements and a lesser comprehension of [Antonietta],” and is troubled by “the terrible monotony of the routine that quietly traps the white-collar worker and channels youth into the oblivion of old age,” (Crowther 1963: 36)⁶. Despite this, Crowther still feels that the film “is modest in its



Loredana Detto, Sandro Panzeri in “*Sound of Trumpets*.”

intentions, limited in its scope,” which is understandable, due to Olmi’s documentarian,

⁵ By BOSLEY CROWTHER "TOP FILMS OF 1963" *New York Times* (1923-), Dec 29, 1963.

⁶ By, BOSLEY CROWTHER. "Screen: A Clerk in Italy: 'Sound of Trumpets' at Two Theaters." *New York Times* (1923-), Oct 23, 1963.

non-judgmental style of filmmaking. This comment, coming at the end of his review, makes one wonder if Crowther simply understood the film to be a troubling story about the misfortunes of a working-class boy instead of a greater commentary on the human condition in Italy under a newly imposed corporate capitalist system.

While Crowther's political reading of *Il Posto* was perhaps unclear, one writer made their feelings known in their Newsweek review titled, *Creepy*. "The picture is not playing fair with us. By not telling us what the company makes or sells or does, director Olmi reduces it to abstract toil, which is depressing. Even more unfair are the events—or lack of them—after the introduction of Loredana Detto, the very lovely girl Sandro meets during exams," they continue, writing, "Olmi characterizes Sandro as the kind of boy that girls ordinarily forget, the kind of boy who invariably gets crummy jobs in huge, icy companies—in short, a creep. This in turn reduces the film to a statement that it's no fun being a creep. Some statement," (Newsweek 1963: 111)⁷. The critic is displeased with the vague nature of Domenico's employer, feeling that Olmi is unfairly representing the corporate world. They also take issue with the lack of explanation behind Domenico's struggle to further his relationship with Antonietta, which can be explained by subtle moments in the film which make clear that it is the company itself keeping the two apart. To this end, the author seems to take the stance that it is by Domenico's own failure of character that he finds himself in his depressing reality, to no fault of the societal structures in which he has no choice but to partake in.

Rounding out reviews from the East Coast, Henry Murdock gave his thoughts on the film in a review for *The Philadelphia Enquirer*. Murdock is very complimentary of the film, comparing Olmi to the likes of famed Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni. As he begins to

⁷ "Creepy." *Newsweek*, Oct 07, 1963, 111,

give his analysis of the film, he writes of Olmi and another Italian director, Dino Risi; “Both of them have things to say about the pressure of their time and its resultant compromises, but they both also have the ability to suggest that the individual may not only be a victim of that time, but also a willing contributor to his victimization,” (Murdock 1964: 69)⁸. Murdock is claiming that Domenico is not truly a victim in this story, because he is partaking in, and thus contributing to, the dehumanizing corporate structures. Once more, this reading of the film seems to be similarly informed by the notion of the “American Dream” and other long-held American values such as rugged individualism. Domenico being a ‘willing contributor’ implies that he could’ve chosen to not take the corporate job when it is clear from the onset of the film that he would have no choice but to discontinue his education and pursue this career path. Domenico is symbolic of millions of Southern and rural Italians who flocked to the newly industrious North in hopes of escaping generations of poverty. There is no opportunity in the film for Domenico to blaze his own path and pull himself up by his bootstraps, as many Americans love to say, and so Murdock, as many American conservatives tend to do, ignores the harsh reality of the limits that poverty has imposed on Italy’s working class.

We move, then, to America’s Midwest, a region of the country traditionally known for farming, manufacturing, and a typically more conservative way of life. Things seem to be no different, however, in Cincinnati, where Judith Crist writes for the Cincinnati Enquirer, “every critic in town, even the magazine, has greeted [the film] with what the coolest of minds would term ‘rave’ reviews,” going on to say, “It’s a beautiful film, for truth is indeed beauty, and its truth is in its quiet story of a boy’s application and testing for a job in a large corporation and his

⁸ By, MELVIN MADDOCKS. "'Sound of Trumpets'." *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908-), Oct 24, 1963.

becoming a cog in the machine that absorbs so many of us,” (Crist 1963: 19)⁹. She further comments upon the parallels between Domenico’s situation and the reality that much of the American youth faced at the time, “...plugging away in educational and industrial competition,” noting that, “no American film-maker could possibly see drama in such situations,”. Crist provides a reading of the film that recognizes the greater institutional systems that Olmi is criticizing and even goes so far as to highlight a number of those which were plaguing American youth in the same way the film presents the struggles of this Italian youth. In this, she is acknowledging the greater humanist implications of the film; that corporations and other institutional powers dehumanize those who have no choice but to participate in them.

In Oshkosh and Appleton, Wisconsin, two small, adjacent cities positioned between Green Bay and Milwaukee, one critic provides the perspective of a more rural audience. They write, “The film, equally touching and amusing, deals with the absolute truths inherent in bridging childhood and manhood, schooldays and workdays, and the freedom of youth and the inexorable accommodation to the world’s great machine,” (The Post-Crescent 1966: 22)¹⁰. Once again, Olmi’s aptitude as a filmmaker wins over the praise of another critic, however, they also seem to miss the societal criticism that Olmi presents in the film. Instead of acknowledging the dehumanization Domenico and his coworkers face from the corporate hierarchy, it is written off as an ‘absolute truth inherent’ to entering the working world. The critic is thus presenting Domenico’s situation as one that is unavoidable and a natural part of life, that one should forfeit freedom for the sake of a corporate machine, an idea that deeply opposes the humanist message of the film. The author may be reading the film as a dramatization of a child’s perspective

⁹ CRIST, JUDITH. "Fine Movie, Sans Sex, Proves Bust As Box Office Success." *Cincinnati Enquirer* (1923-2009), Nov 20, 1963.

¹⁰ "Fun Classic, Prizewinner In Film Series" *The Post-Crescent* (1965-2012), Feb 11, 1966.

entering the working world. Olmi's documentarian, observational, non-judgmental style of filmmaking, however, does not lend itself well to this reading. Wisconsin, at the time of the film's release, was a solidly Republican state, and a stronghold for conservative American values. The aforementioned American ideals such as "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" would have been particularly popular in this part of the country and makes reading the film as an allegory for such a notion less surprising.

Finally, we finish our critical exploration in Los Angeles, the heart and soul of the American film industry and home to Hollywood. In her review for the Los Angeles Times, Margaret Harford comments on the sympathy one feels for Domenico throughout the film, writing, "The boy's awkward inexperience is everybody's experience" and further empathizes with Domenico's position at the end of the film; "Disappointment, resignation, the monotony of a treadmill job that will trap him into old age and all the unspoken, half-understood complexities of human relationships build to an ironic climax," (Harford 1964: C6)¹¹. Her writing does little in the way of critiquing the film, though she seems to have taken away a message of empathy for the poor Italian youth, and those unfortunate enough to be in his same situation, which very well may have been Olmi's ultimate goal with the film as there is no political messaging within the film.

The Los Angeles Times also published two calendars, one of the recent movie openings and the other of weekly screenings, which refer to *Il Posto*. In the first, the film is described as, "Olmi's drama of a shy young man whose budding romance with a pretty coworker is challenged by the overwhelming mechanization of their business world," (Los Angeles Times: 1966: N3)¹²,

¹¹ Harford, Margaret. "AT THE CLINTON: VITALITY KEYNOTES ITALIAN FILMS." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Apr 30, 1964.

¹² "Movies: Openings." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Oct 23, 1966.

seeming to allege that it is the modernization of the corporate world which challenges Domenico, and not the impersonal nature of the work and company. The second provides some interesting insight as it lists *That's Me*, “a comical satire about a social worker helping a Puerto Rican youth adjust to New York City Life,” (CITATION) as being co-billed for *Il Posto*'s opening. This double screening is quite interesting, as some parallels can be drawn and examined between the two films. In both films, the protagonist is newly out of place in a big city and finds himself face to face with a harsh new reality. The Puerto Rican youth requires the help of a social worker, implying an air of incompetence and some level of personal failure to support oneself, especially in America where rugged individualism and self-reliance are seen by many as the barometer for personal success. It is, of course, impossible to say what the true intentions were behind this co-billing, whether they were meant to complement or contrast each other, but it does grant further insight concerning whether American audiences understood *Il Posto* to be a story of personal or systemic failure.

The further we delve into various reviews from across the United States, a clearer image begins to form of leftist thinking across the country. Long-held American values such as rugged individualism and the “American Dream” seem to have acted as blinders for many critics of the time, as they read the film to be a story more personal to Domenico and his own failures, instead of as a greater allegory for the condition of the working class under corporate capitalism; a societal structure which was imposed on Italy through American foreign policy. Reception to the film was by no means uniform or entirely predictable based on regional stereotypes. While critics in more rural areas may have been predisposed to conservative thinking, urban critics in some cases shared many of the same sentiments. Additionally, despite the Midwest's association with Christian conservatism, its blue-collar roots and strong history of unionized labor may have

also lent moviegoers more sympathy to the worker's plight than more traditionally white-collar areas. The film itself contains no political messaging, as, unlike his neorealist predecessors, Olmi was not making his films in the wake of Italy's fascist government collapsing and was not primarily concerned with making clear political statements. Instead, his film carried a message of humanism and aimed to highlight the dehumanization seemingly inherent to corporate working structures. Also interesting was the lack of focus among American film critics of the scene in which Domenico's dead coworker's possessions, notably the manuscript he was writing and represented a deeper inner self, were discarded by his bosses. The strongest symbol of individuality among the company employees is discarded, cementing that under corporate capitalism the individual is of no importance.

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