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Emanuela Guano

**Social Immobility and the Poetics of Contentment in Paolo Virzì's
*Caterina in the Big City***

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Abstract

By intertwining fictional and actual circumstances and characters from Italy's political and cultural scene, Paolo Virzì's *Caterina va in città/Caterina in the Big City* tells the story of the difficulties encountered by Giancarlo Iacovoni and his daughter Caterina as they strive to carve a place for themselves in Roman society. This article argues that, while seemingly upholding the meritocracy myth, the film actually challenges both the inclusiveness feigned by Italy's right wing populists and the emancipation promises of the Left. Furthermore, it suggests that *Caterina in the Big City* posits a poetics of contentment as the only viable option in the face of class inequalities that are simultaneously denied and enforced by conservative and progressive elites alike.

Keywords: clientelism; social mobility; populism; culture, politics and society; Italy.

Social Immobility and the Poetics of Contentment in Paolo Virzì's *Caterina in the Big City*

Introduction

Released in 2003, *Caterina va in città/Caterina in the Big City* tells the story of a family of three that leaves the deep Italian province to go to Rome. Ambition is the reason of the move: Giancarlo Iacovoni, Caterina's father and a frustrated school teacher, is seeking patronage in order to have his novel published. What city would offer him better opportunities than Rome, Italy's political and cultural capital? Once in the big city, teenage Caterina attends a prestigious public school where she meets the offspring of the local political and intellectual elites. Giancarlo's attempts to network his way through Caterina's ever-shifting social circles, however, are unsuccessful. In fact, Caterina herself struggles to navigate an elitist and highly polarized social environment where she is alternatively recruited and alienated by her peers. After a string of failures, Giancarlo loses his hopes of finding a willing patron, and becomes increasingly bitter. Eventually, he rides off on his motorcycle and vanishes, leaving Caterina and his frazzled wife Agata the room they need to breathe freely and live a quiet life devoid of unrealistic ambitions.

Consistently with Virzì's style, this *commedia all'italiana* provides an analysis of Italian society by blending microrealism and allegories (Brunetta 2009: 307); in *Caterina in the Big City*, however, Virzì's critique is made even more trenchant through the intertwining of fictional circumstances and actual events and characters from Italy's political and cultural scene. Some of the themes Virzì tackles in *Caterina* already figured in his previous films: the quest for political patronage seen in *Baci e abbracci* (2002), resignation in the face of an impossible social mobility

in *Ovosodo* (1997), the exploration of class identities in *La bella vita* (1992) and the polarization between Italian conservatives and progressives in *Ferie d'agosto* (1995). Like *Ovosodo* and *Il mio nome é Tanino* (2002), *Caterina in the Big City* is a *Bildungsroman* (Dominici nd:344) that revolves around the social and sentimental education of an adolescent who, after much struggle, eventually finds her place in the world. It is also an inverted *Künstlerroman* in which Giancarlo's pursuit of fame through patronage causes his ruin. A destabilizing element in his family's life, Giancarlo's quasi-Faustian striving for notoriety is quietly resented by his wife Agata, whose simplicity and penchant for provincial life are at odds with his ambitions. In the end, it is Agata's worldview that triumphs, as a poetics of contentment whereby the only possible satisfaction derives from the refusal to challenge the status quo.

In this article I argue that, even as it seemingly upholds the hegemonic fiction of meritocracy in Italian society, Virzi's *Caterina* actually implements irony and ambiguity to question it. As a critique of dynamics that are deeply embedded in Italian society, the film provides a pessimistic reflection not just on the inclusiveness feigned by right wing populists, but also and especially on the contradictions intrinsic to the emancipation promises of the Italian left. Hence, contentment becomes the only alternative Virzi's film prospects in a society where class inequalities and social immobility are simultaneously enforced and denied by conservative and progressive elites alike.

City and Country

Only once in recent history did a degree of upward mobility become possible for large swaths of the Italian population. During the economic miracle of the 1960s, destitute men and women from the rural South moved to northern metropolises—especially the industrial triangle of Turin, Milan, and Genoa--in order to secure a better living as workers in the rapidly expanding industrial sector. This mass migration caused the rise of a large working class first, and then a full-fledged urban middle-class (Ginsborg 1990: 237). Thus, in the Italian imaginary, upward social mobility became associated with leaving the countryside in order to embrace urban modernity. However, the scenario posited by *Caterina* is somewhat different, and so are the opportunities Giancarlo is pursuing. Giancarlo is not an uneducated, dispossessed peasant from the rural South. Furthermore, he does not move to an industrial city of the north, but rather to Rome: a city that has never been an industrial hub, and whose prosperity is based on its role as Italy's political and cultural capital (Caracciolo 1969). After all, as a teacher, Giancarlo already belongs to the middling sectors of Italian society. What he needs is a little help that could make him into a published writer, and hence a member of the intelligentsia. His home town Montalto di Castro is not that rural, either, as indicated by the power plant towering over its beach. Yet, the stark contrast between the hypercultured city and its provincial backwaters is a central theme in the film.

As Raymond Williams (1973) observed, in much of European cultural production the dichotomy of city and country has taken on symbolic meanings imbued with moral judgments: if the countryside is peaceful and idyllic, the city is dangerous and debased. On the contrary, when the country is dull and backward, the city is vibrant and modern. Both perspectives rest on ideological assumptions about the division of labor underlying class hierarchies as well as its concealment through the aesthetics of leisure. On one hand, pastoral idealizations of the country

are steeped in an ideology of consumption that elides peasants' labor, and presents landed aristocrats with the fruits of a nature that is cast as spontaneously generous. In this context, demonizations of the city sustain a feudal-inspired antagonism to capitalism. On the other hand, the strategy of representing the city as a center of high culture, civilization, and modernity also devalues peasant work and culture by portraying country life as backward. The discourse about city and country in Virzì's *Caterina* incorporates both perspectives in the form of a bifocality that, in fact, posits what I call the poetics of contentment: that is, the decision of embracing the lowbrow pleasures of the province as if they were a desirable option while accepting one's own marginality and exclusion from the urban networks that detain social, cultural, and political power.

Giancarlo's choice of moving to the city and away from the province is informed by his admiration for Rome's cultural primacy. His wife Agata, instead, is perfectly comfortable with her provincial lifestyle, and the big city intimidates her. Just like Giancarlo's idealization of the city sets him up for a major disappointment, Agata's appreciation of life in the province hides some bitter truths. Throughout the film, the social environs of the city come across as hard to access and navigate. The small town, instead, is described by its residents as a safe, undemanding haven: one where Caterina and her family are always surrounded by friends and relatives as they engage in simple pleasures such as playing tombola or frolicking on an industrial beach. When Caterina prepares to move to the big city, her cousin tells her that not only are people in Rome "*stronzi*" (translatable in this context as "presumptuous asses"), but also that Rome does not have the "genuine atmosphere" and the "clean air" Caterina can only find in Montalto di Castro.

Virzì's urbanites may, indeed, be "stronzi;" that the air in Montalto di Castro is so clean, however, is a questionable assumption. Montalto di Castro hosts what was originally destined to become a nuclear plant. In 1987, in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster and the ensuing referendum on nuclear power, this structure was converted into Europe's largest electrical plant. In 2002, at the time when Virzì was shooting *Caterina*, the ENEL electrical company that owns the Montalto plant was contemplating the opportunity of converting it to coal. Barely hinted to during the film, the plant opens a gaping hole in the narrative of rural idyll as told by Montalto's own residents. At the beginning of *Caterina*, the presence of the plant is mentioned by Caterina's left wing and hence environmentally conscious classmates. It appears again at the end of the film, when its monstrous structure looms large against the horizon of the beach where Caterina and her mother find solace in the company of their relatives. Nobody in Virzì's Montalto talks about the plant, and nobody complains about it. Montalto's lower-middle-class beach-goers pretend not to see it as they mimic a bourgeois leisure to which they do not really have access. And yet, the plant is there, and its potential for pollution injects a Dickensian touch into a provincial environment that is not so pristine after all, thus casting a doubt on local dichotomies of pure country and corrupt city.

Roman Tribes

On the other hand, far from being the land of opportunities imagined by Giancarlo, Virzì's Rome hosts a claustrophobic society where access to prestige and power is co-opted by local elites on both the conservative and the progressive end of the political spectrum. This

political and cultural colonization of society is reflected in the identity politics of the Roman youth whereby few alternatives are possible to being a *zecca* (leftist) or a *pariolino* (conservative). The antagonistic youth subcultures in Caterina's middle school are best described as neotribes (Maffesoli 1998) whose political differences are expressed through looks, language, and consumption choices, and mirror the cultural and political preferences of inadequate and largely absentee parents. As the latter are too overworked or immature to fulfill their role, these neotribes provide their teenage members with a sense of belonging that obviates the inadequacies of their families of origin. Whether one joins the progressives or the conservatives, though, choosing an affiliation requires accepting its top-down leadership.

Consistently with the monopoly on high culture that the Italian left has had since the end of World War II (Gundle 2000), Caterina's leftist friends practice a self-absorbed introspection and exhibit a dramatic sensibility; they shop at street markets, engage in street protests against Silvio Berlusconi's government, and sport Palestinian scarves on their hippy clothes. Margherita, their leader and Caterina's first best friend, is the daughter of prominent intellectuals. To her, Caterina is a contemporary version of a *bon sauvage*: a country girl whose main charm is her adorable folksy naivete, and a blank slate to be filled with her own worldview. With Margherita, Caterina learns leftist political jargon, joins protest *girotondi* (merry-go-rounds) where she meets Roberto Benigni (performing himself), and receives a tattoo. This friendship is rescinded through the intervention of Giancarlo, who yells at Margherita for getting his daughter drunk—and, most importantly, for throwing his manuscript in the garbage instead of delivering it to her influential mother.

When her friendship with Margherita suffers a setback, Caterina is recruited by Daniela, the daughter of Mario Germano. The latter is a parliamentary subsecretary (vice minister) from

Alleanza Nazionale, Italy's post-fascist party and one of the allies in Silvio Berlusconi's 2001-2006 conservative government coalition. While Virzi's leftists are all intellectuals, his right-wingers are enamored with popular and mass culture, consumerism in the first place. In fact, Caterina and Daniela meet serendipitously at a shopping center: an appropriate site for the lifestyle of hyperconsumption and frivolity into which Caterina is about to take a plunge.

Finding a superficial empowerment in the ideals of hypersexual femininity promoted by Berlusconi's television channels, Daniela and her rigorously blond acolytes are flirtatious and extremely concerned with their appearance; they wear designer clothes, which they occasionally shoplift for the fun of it; they ride a governmental limousine (*auto blu*) to go to parties and on shopping sprees, and manically write text messages to each other. Through them, Caterina encounters some of the contrasting souls of the Italian right. The provincial right embodied by Daniela's father's relatives and childhood friends, for example, is lowbrow, loud, and tacky. This is the coarse rank-and-file that is still loyal to Mussolini's legacy. Marginalized by the "*logiche di palazzo*" (elitist political cabals) for decades, nostalgic small-town Fascists now feel vindicated by their representatives' inclusion in Berlusconi's 2001-2006 government. Their hoarse hymns to Mussolini and their Roman salutes, however, are an embarrassment for Germano, who, just like actual Alleanza Nazionale representatives, has had to sanitize his public persona when his post-Fascist party finally found its way to parliament.

As a daughter of the new right, Daniela finds the politically incorrect exuberance of her provincial relatives amusing. Much to her father's discomfort, she does not even disdain joining in as they sing to the *Duce*. Daniela's mother, instead, is repulsed by this coarseness. Aside from sharing the same conservative ideological umbrella, Germano's lower-class relatives have little in common with his wife Veronica: an aristocrat whose family cultivates tradition,

sophistication, and high culture.¹ This elitist, aristocratic soul of the Italian right is most clearly embodied by Veronica's teenage nephew Gianfilippo. Known among his cousins as quaintly old-fashioned "Gianfilippo of England," Gianfilippo listens to opera instead of pop music, wears suits and ties in the place of jeans, and uses antiquated words such as "*ciclomotore*" and "*telefono portatile*" in lieu of "*moto*" and "*telefonino*." The chasm between rarefied aristocrats and uncultured neo-fascists is obvious, and Daniela has no qualms in reporting her mother's contempt to her paternal grandmother. Hard of hearing as she is, her granny will never understand anyway. Daniela's deaf *nonna* is an apt metaphor for how, intoxicated with their illusion of political success, small-town fascists are unable to realize how little they really matter.

What holds together this mosaic of clashing conservative subcultures, Virzì's film suggests, is Giordano's versatility in conversing with each of them seemingly on its own terms. This skill of extending (and often feigning) inclusiveness and representation recalls conservative leader Silvio Berlusconi's charismatic talents. Ever since his political debut in 1994, not only has Berlusconi proven capable of leading heterogeneous coalitions comprised of his own Forza Italia party along with the nationalistic Alleanza Nazionale and the secessionist Lega Nord,² but he has also shown a remarkable ability to use his media to extract the consent of middle- and working classes to agendas in which the actual interests of the latter are only thinly represented.³ In *Caterina in the Big City*, however, this bridging of class barriers is only a sham. In reality, trying to step out of one's place in society is likely to bring about crises and, ultimately, suffering.

Putting People in their Place

The places that Virzì's characters occupy in society are rendered through their personal geographies. There is little doubt that, if Caterina eventually manages to carve a place for herself

in Rome, her mother Agata belongs in Montalto, and her father Giancarlo belongs nowhere. The narration of the dramas and mishaps that await the Iacovonis as they move away from the province and into a big city where they do not belong provides a canvas for the telling of a myriad stories about people's places and people out of place. Most of these stories are class parables. Caterina, for example, is cast as a bumpkin. This becomes clear during her first day in her new school. When the teacher asks her to provide her bemused schoolmates with a geographic explanation of where Montalto really is, the small town can only be mapped vaguely as a place "north west of Rome," with the latter being the true navel of the civilized world (Colamartino nd: 3). Caterina's provincialism and her being out of place among Roman elites is also the reason why her romance with Gianfilippo, Daniela's cousin, is nipped in the bud by the latter's aristocratic mother. For people of Gianfilippo's milieu, Caterina is too provincial (and hence plebeian) to be acceptable. Even the passion for the opera the two adolescents share does not provide Caterina with enough distinction (Bourdieu 1984) as to make her acceptable in his family's eyes. The naïve authenticity of her enthusiasm for classical music is cast in stark contrast with the elitism of an aristocratic taste for which the concern with opera is mainly an exercise in conspicuous consumption.

If Caterina's brushes with class barriers are caused by her naivete, her father Giancarlo's humiliations are a backlash against his ambition. Giancarlo's first attempt to draw attention to his manuscript is deflected when, after reading out loud an excerpt, Margherita dismisses him as a "sexual maniac." Her condemnation of Giancarlo's work as "pornographic" reinscribes a class difference that is modulated on the politics of taste as the main boundary between elite and mass culture (Bourdieu 1984). In this scenario, porn is always again situated on the other side of the cultural and social border (Atwood 2002: 95). Indeed, the same explicit language and crudely

sexual imagery Giancarlo uses in his manuscript are pervasive in much of Italy's mass culture, from cinema to television (Brunetta 2009: 275). Positioning itself in stark contrast to the high-cultural elitism of the left (Gundle 2000), the latter is the province of a conservative populism whereby the reinscription of lowbrow patriarchal sexuality is instrumental to masculinist right-wing agendas (Ginsborg 2005: 43). If it is true that the ascription of the pornography label is a "moment of classification" (Atwood 2002: 95), Margherita is, literally, putting Giancarlo in his place as the "other:" politically retrograde and uncultured.

Women are frequently put in their place in the film, too; however, they fight back with some success. Performing herself as a former minister of the progressive Ulivo party, Giovanna Melandri cleverly replies "so what, you have a nice tie, too" when, following Berlusconi's strategy of using gallantry to remind women of their subordination (Ginsborg 2005: 43), Mario Germano tries to silence her by hailing her as a "beautiful lady" during a televised political debate. Giancarlo, instead, keeps his wife Agata in her place by treating her like a dim-witted inept. He patronizes her, and repeatedly scorns her for her lack of ambition and her inability to understand him. Though bewildered, initially Agata does not fight back. Instead, she takes on the stereotypical role of the docile Italian housewife whose life revolves around the preparation of food for her family. Agata is constantly cooking and feeding others, and she does so till the day she has a breakdown. After Giancarlo's conclusive tirade about how people in their social class cannot even afford "the respect of others," she grabs the plates on the dinner table and shatters them one by one, thus symbolically interrupting her domestic servility and rescinding her reluctant complicity with his madness. Then, she sits at the table and declares "let's eat." She is finally ready to move on, though without Giancarlo.

The dialectics of Agata's being out of place (in Rome), her being kept in her place (the kitchen), and her finding her place (in Montalto) are every bit as revealing as Giancarlo's. Agata never shared her husband's enthusiasm for the big city; unlike him, she is perfectly adjusted to life in the province. This is where she escapes the alien dichotomy of exclusionary high culture and commercial mass culture that characterizes Roman society, and finds her solace in folksy practices such as playing tombola with friends and family. As Giancarlo pursues his misplaced ambitions (and ultimately his ruin) in Rome, Agata initiates an affair with Fabietto, Giancarlo's underachieving friend whom naive Giancarlo had previously graced with a pitiful "*poveretto*" (poor thing). Just like Agata, Fabietto has no ambitions; just like her, he knows his place in life. His lack of social mobility is epitomized by his vehicle of choice: a bicycle. Giancarlo, instead, has a passion for motorcycles. A metaphor for his raving ambition and a spoof on an *Easy-Rider*-style quest for a freedom from social conventions that is not possible in Italy, the motorcycle is what will eventually remove Giancarlo from his family and Roman society, allowing him to vanish for good without being really missed. Agata, instead, has a small car which she drives from Montalto to Rome, and back again. Consistently with her character, she is a frazzled driver—but only as long as Giancarlo is hovering. Once he does her the favor of disappearing, Agata gains confidence. At the end of the film, she is driving her little red car again. This time, however, she has no hesitations: not only is Giancarlo gone, but her final destination is Montalto di Castro anyway.

Caterina's Mirror

After a few brushes with class barriers, Caterina is eventually able to find a place for herself in Roman society: one that is defined by her loyalty to Montalto as well as her passion for

music. At the end of the film, Caterina fulfills her dream of gaining admission to a highly selective and prestigious *conservatorio* (music high school): a feat which she presumably accomplishes all on her own, on the basis of her actual merits. However, this seemingly uplifting conclusion manifests only after much tribulation.

Caught between competing worldviews, lifestyles, and ultimately identities, for much of the film Caterina is confused about her own place in the world. When her neotribal friends dress her up according to their respective tastes, she stares at herself in the mirror, but finds no answers. Her encounters with her specular I (Lacan 1977:5) as it is defined by the gaze of others do not help her organize her sense of self. It will take yet another gaze—one that is fully external to her world--to ignite an identification that Caterina experiences as more authentic, as she learns to accept her place in society.

When Caterina looks at herself in the mirror, she does so because she does not know who she really is. Others seem to know it for her, as they impose their styles and perspectives on her docile body. The question “who are you, really?”, however, is asked only by Edward, her Australian neighbor: a boy who, in an explicit citation of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), has been watching her from across the courtyard. Confused by her own identity swings, Caterina feels comforted by this external gaze that sees everything, puts things in perspective, and asks the right question—the question she is not able to ask—even as it shows sympathy for her.

Besides providing a critique of class boundaries and social immobility, *Caterina in the Big City* also offers an opportunity to ponder issues of national identity. Caterina’s body serves as the reflection of a national self (Dalle Vacche 1991: 254) whose supposedly authentic essence is overshadowed through competing scripts. As Edward approaches Caterina from a safe spatial

and cultural distance, his foreignness provides her with the reassurance of an objective external observer, even as it preempts the specter of uncomfortable national comparisons (Anderson 1998). As a gentle and wide-eyed metaphor for the fragility and the self-doubt that are embedded in representations of Italian nationhood (Dickie 2001:29), Caterina's body could never withstand other, and possibly more oppressive, Western gazes. Too much baggage is inscribed into the way Italy is viewed (and often scoffed at) by the media of its European neighbors; just as much angst permeates the way many Italians perceive such critical stares on their alleged national character flaws (Dickie 2001: 29). Hence, the gaze that helps Caterina define herself is from Australia: a Western country that, in Italy's geopolitical imaginary, does not carry threatening connotations.⁴ Devoid of both the superciliousness of Italy's European neighbors and the imperialistic clout of the United States, this distant gaze on Caterina's life is not obviously invested in the attempt to establish a hierarchy of self and other.

Furthermore, while the male gaze traditionally cast on the bodies of Hollywood actresses has a sexual and disempowering quality (Mulvey 1975; 1989), Caterina's affair with the Australian boy is largely platonic. In fact, it is Caterina who acts out her own desire by kissing Edward, and then safely fleeing him. As sexual entanglements are prevented, their platonic relationship can be, and in fact is, therapeutic. Thus, it is Edward who allows Caterina to see her father's destructive influence on his family and his own life, as well as her mother's own suffering and eventual liberation. After Edward informs Caterina that he is going back to Australia, his fleeting role as an external support is fulfilled, and now she can move on and find her place in the world all on her own. Once set free through Edward's gaze as well as her father's disappearance, Caterina finds her true self by taking refuge in the small pleasures of life: her passion for the Montalto beach and for classical music.

Giancarlo's Failure and the Myth of Meritocracy

Caterina's success in being admitted to the music school of her dreams should not induce Virzi's publics to an excessive confidence about the possibility for social mobility in Italian society. It is not unusual for Italian schools (especially public ones) to be meritocratic preserves where students are instilled the credo that hard work and talent determine one's success in life (Signorelli 1990: 265). In most cases, however, this promise does not outlast graduation. The reality most Italian youth encounter upon graduating is one of extremely low social mobility—so low that, regardless of qualifications, 40.8% of the Italian workforce is stuck in the same occupational niche as their fathers (CENSIS 2006). Many jobs and professions are frequently handed down from one generation to the next. The family businesses and firms that constitute the backbone of Italian economy are inherited by sons, or, more rarely, daughters (Yanagisako 2002). Informal recruiting dynamics whereby membership in an influential family is enough as to open all doors grant bourgeois children a preferential access to their parents' professions in politics, the arts, and even academia (Zinn 2001: 98). Given a scenario whereby social capital is effective in protecting and perpetuating class privileges (Portes 1998), Giancarlo's choice of seeking out a patron who can help him get his book published instead of fighting it alone can only be described as realistic. Why, then, does he fail?

While, at least superficially, docile Caterina has an easier time being integrated in her peers' groups, her father's obnoxious, inappropriate manners are a barrier to entry in the social circles he approaches. Giancarlo is socially awkward, arrogant, and downright annoying. Hence, he consistently fails in his attempts to gain the support of those he identifies as potential patrons. When Giancarlo finally realizes that his chances for success are close to nil, he spirals into anger

and despondency, steeping up his denunciations of the *conventicole* (cliques) that control access to material and symbolic resources in Italian society. Even though Giancarlo's *j'accuse* resonates with grievances that are frequently heard in Italy, it is hard to take him seriously. Giancarlo does not find the right language for his accusations. The words he uses to denounce the immobility of Roman society and the power of its elites— *mafie* and *soliti noti* (“the usual suspects”)—are clichés whose banality preempts any potential for incisiveness. Dulled by its déjà-vu aura, even “conventicole” is yet another useless tool in his arsenal.

Furthermore, consistently with the stereotyped behavior of a *commedia dell'arte* character, Giancarlo's expressions of anger are frequently out of place, and his choice of arenas and audiences for his denunciations is just as poor. As a spectator in the studio of a popular television show, for example, Giancarlo bursts into a tirade at the worst possible time, thus embarrassing himself publicly.⁵ If, at a deeper level, this episode demonstrates the failure of the democratization claims put forth by the televised mass culture of the Berlusconi era, it can also be interpreted as yet another demonstration of Giancarlo's own mediocrity. Since Giancarlo's manuscript, as reiterated on several occasions, is of poor quality, his denunciations can be easily written off as a matter of sour grapes by somebody who could have never made it anyway.

As anthropologists frequently observed (Shore 1989, Zinn 2001), the clientelistic and nepotistic logics that control the distribution of jobs, resources, and opportunities in many sectors of Italian society are shrouded in, and occulted by, a fiction of meritocracy whereby kin and clients of the powerful are always again cast as the most deserving of access to wealth, power, and prestige. This is the game Virzì plays, too, as he initially lures his viewers into accepting a hegemonic interpretation of Giancarlo's exclusive responsibility in his own failures. While the jury is out on whether a more talented and socially savvy Giancarlo would have been more

successful, at a closer look it becomes obvious that dismissing him for his mediocrity and his unwarranted ambitions does not fully dispel the ghosts of a social injustice and an inequality that are perpetuated not just by conservative elites, but also by the leftist intelligentsia.

Conclusion: Can the Left be Critiqued?

As Palti (1997:23) observed, formulating a critique of a liberal left that does not echo reactionary stances posits enormous difficulties. In contemporary Italy, non-aligned leftists who, like Virzì, have expressed skepticism of progressive elites are often met with the accusation of being *qualunquisti*.⁶ As the vernacular belief that ideological differences between the right and the left are but a sham for the actual self-serving, power-grabbing practices of professional politicians, *qualunquismo* precludes the possibility of a genuine political engagement.⁷ And, as it does so, it glorifies an opportunism that is akin to Giancarlo's own quest for a patron—*any* patron, regardless of ideological affiliation.

After his *Caterina* was released, Virzì faced frequent accusations of *qualunquismo* from his critics.⁸ Some of these charges, I suggest, may stem from the confusion between Giancarlo's character and the director's own stance. There is no doubt that Giancarlo is a textbook *qualunquista*; however, it would be a mistake to believe that he is actually channeling Virzì. If this were the case, Giancarlo would not be so easy to dismiss. Instead, Virzì uses Giancarlo's character for the sake of levying his critique of the Italian left, even as he challenges his publics to tease out structural inequities from individual shortcomings. In portraying Giancarlo, Virzì achieves a *sui generis* alienation effect (Brecht 1964) whereby any identification with Giancarlo's woes is preempted by the latter's ludicrous behavior and his irritating personality. As most characters in the film both sneer at Giancarlo and find him laughable, it is easy for film

viewers to laugh along, thus blaming the outcomes of exclusionary social dynamics on an ostensibly flawed individual. The laughter becomes just a little less hearty, though, upon observing the unctuous treatment the school principal metes out to Margherita and Daniela's fathers when he summons their daughters after a fistfight. The unease may further intensify as viewers witness the social intimacy between conservative sub-secretary Germano and Margherita's father, progressive intellectual Rossi-Chenier:⁹ a display of mutual friendship that provides Giancarlo with the final (and for him shocking) evidence that his social conspiracy theories are, in fact, on the mark. Aside from befuddling Giancarlo, though, this closeness raises broader and deeper questions about class inequalities and the real nature of the antagonism between conservative and progressive elites in contemporary Italy: an antagonism in which only the young and the naïve, Virzì's film suggests, can honestly believe.

If *Caterina in the Big City* surmises that populist conservative leaders have granted the lower sectors of their electorate an unwarranted illusion of inclusion (among others through their use of mass culture), it also indicts high-brow leftist elites for losing touch with the classes whose interests they are supposed to represent. Popular with conservative sectors of Italian society (Ward 2001: 95),¹⁰ this analysis also resonates with the growing skepticism of post-communist voters who have become wary of their leaders' inability to relate to their constituencies. Particularly meaningful, in this respect, is the view uttered by one of Caterina's classmates at the beginning of the film:

the communists are all rich and have college degrees; fascists are all poorer and more ignorant... Right-wingers are working folks, whereas communists are all, like, doctors, directors and filmmakers: all folks who don't need to work.

Even though the words of a teenager may seem to carry little weight, Virzì's film proceeds to confirm this assessment: all of the leftist characters it features are writers, directors,

artists, and intellectuals. Some of them are so wary of manual labor that they even hire immigrant women to clean their homes, thus reproducing the exploitative politics of class, gender, and ethnicity that, in theory, they should denounce. For those who, like Giancarlo, do not belong to an elite, the implications are ominous. Once even the emancipatory promises of the left have lost their credibility, it becomes clear how few opportunities are still available to the masses. Upward mobility, as Giancarlo finds out, is not among them. Embodied by Agata and her lowbrow provincial pastimes, contentment is a more realistic option. Hence, Agata's tombolas with friends and her summers at the power plant beach offer the comfort of a lifestyle that, while being a poor imitation of bourgeois leisure, posits a seemingly safe alternative to an ambition that can only lead to failure.

Notes

¹ Veronica Giordano's character obviously recalls Veronica Lario, Silvio Berlusconi's second wife. Like Lario, Veronica Giordano is "*bellissima*" (very beautiful), has worked as a theater actress, and leads a secluded life. Unlike her, however, she has an aristocratic pedigree.

² In 2009, Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale merged into the Popolo della Libertá party led by Berlusconi.

³ The creation of a moral panic about immigration has been a leading strategy in diverting middle- and working class attention from economic and political issues.

⁴ That of the many Italians who migrated to Australia is a little-known and rarely told history; just as frequently ignored is the pervasiveness of anti-Italian sentiments in the Australia of the twentieth century.

⁵ The show is the *Maurizio Costanzo show*, which has been aired since 1982 on Retequattro and Canale 5: two of Berlusconi's own television channels.

⁶ A concern among leftist loyalists is that the increasingly abstensionistic voting behavior of disenchanted progressives has weakened the Italian left, and is to blame, among others, for the victory of Berlusconi's coalition in the 2008 elections (Itanes 2009).

⁷ Now used as a derogatory term, *qualunquismo* defines a constellation of anti-political stances that first coalesced around the *L'uomo qualunque* (The Man in the Street) weekly publication founded by Guglielmo Giannini in 1944. For all its claims that ordinary citizens would do a better job of running the polity than professional politicians, the original *qualunquista* movement was quick to evolve into a short-lived political party: the *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque* (Tarchi 2003: 79). After a remarkable electoral success in 1946, the Fronte dissolved fairly quickly; its tenets, however, survived as a reservoir of anti-political, opportunistic, and often conservative arguments. Half a century later, *qualunquismo* is no longer a movement, but rather only a theme running through much of Italian political discourse.

⁸ See for example <http://www.lankelot.eu/index.php/2006/12/23/virzi-caterina-va-in-citta/> ; <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes/esiste-il-cinema-italiano/2970?printpage=undefined> ; http://www.municipio.re.it/cinema/catfilm.nsf/PES_PerTitolo/F0B295F40671CF57C12573A100423A3D?opendocument ; <http://www.film.tv.it/opinioni.php/film/opinione/330716/tutta-la-vita-davanti-2008/> ; http://www.spietati.it/archivio/recensioni/rece-2003-2004/rece-2003-2004-c/caterina_va_in_citta.htm , last accessed on September 17, 2009.

⁹ The hyphenated (and half-French) last name hints to aristocratic origins.

¹⁰ “Demo-aristo-crats” is how, in recent years, Democratic Party representatives have occasionally been dubbed by conservatives for whom the populism of the right is seemingly more democratic than the intellectual aloofness and the elitism of the left (see for example Massimo Gramellini, “La sinistra dei marchesi” , in *La Stampa* (7/26/2009). http://www.lastampa.it/web/cmstp/tmplRubriche/editoriali/grubrica.asp?ID_blog=41&ID_articolo=652&ID_sezione=56&sezione=, accessed on 9/8/2009.

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