

LA VALLE DELL'EDEN

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NASTRI D'ACCIAIO AND VITA DI UN PORTO. INDUSTRIAL POEMS OF POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION IN THE ITALIAN NON-FICTION CINEMA

Rossella Catanese

1950s Italian “utility films”

Utility and industrial films belong to a specific form of the cinematic language, defined as non-fiction. If fiction cinema is based on the construction of a story and on the criterion of narration, “other” audiovisual forms (non-fiction) can be traced back to alternative criteria of construction of meaning: namely, «in producing non-fiction, a communicator uses some unit of motion picture footage in an effort to assert that something is (or was, or will be, or could be) the case»¹. Within the macro-category of non-fiction, utility films draw a peculiar relationship between visuality, power, and industrial organizations: in the 1950s, industrial films and photography have seen a period of maximum flowering, taking place in other countries besides Italy.

Industrial films had also become among the most prolific “genres” in film history². In these years, Western Countries were experiencing a crucial transformative phase for their economy and their societies. Corporate, industrial, and so-called utility films represent a vast and heterogeneous corpus that acts as an interface between the industrial dimension and the social entity, between memorial traces and the optimization of work processes. The man-machine interaction can be the main key to understanding these films that were addressed to emphasize the modernity of Italy; a country that rose from its ashes after the war.

However, the scope of such films also goes beyond this level: the utility cinema interweaves the history and the language of industry with an aesthetic reflection on the dynamic rhythms and the expressive possibilities of the cinematic medium with regards to the artistic elaboration of the images of modernity. Images that received little scholarship insofar, and have been often read through the “auteur” perspective, especially for the cases of early films by canonical filmmakers, despite its weakness in such framework: in fact, industrial films have an occasion, a purpose, and an addressee, or an *Auftrag*, *Anlass*, and *Adressat*, rather than an auteur: «“wer war der Auftraggeber” (who commissioned the film), “was war der Anlass” (what was the occasion for which it was made), and “was war die An-

1 T. Ponech, *What is Non-Fiction Cinema?*, in R. Allen, M. Smith (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, p. 204.

2 See V. Hediger, P. Vonderau (eds.), *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2009, p. 10.

wendung oder der Adressat” (to what use was it put or to whom was it addressed)»³. The framework of reception for these films was addressed to extend the function of entertainment of movie theatres, in a parallel path towards education; therefore, screening contexts could go beyond the movie theatres and include classrooms, factories, community halls, and even trains or ships. In such environments, the audience could encounter educational and industrial films, expanding the forms and functions of what we define cinema: «there was this other cinema, one defined by film’s ability to transform unlikely spaces, convey ideas, convince individuals, and produce subjects in the service of public and private aims»⁴.

In the last few years, in Italy, we are witnessing a growing attention to industrial films, both in terms of archives and of studies dedicated to this phenomenon. This process of valorization has strengthened the awareness of the role played by industrial film both in the history of Italian industry and in the history of Italian cinema. The reconstruction of Italy after the Second World War aimed to establish again the political spaces as democratic institutions, obliterating the Fascist regime. It was achieved not only through the practice of elections and the citizen engagement/awareness in the ideological debate, but also through the national industry, which received a serious impact from the war destruction. Also, the infrastructures were required to meet modern needs. As part of this process, utility films were used to expand modes of communication within public and private companies, using the tools of visual storytelling to inform and recruit citizens as both workers and consumers. This means engaging the audience with issues of labor productivity, efficiency, labor culture and work ethics, through films that acted as a privileged stage to mediate between individual and collective, promoting social integration as a national recovery from the war. Since the Marshall Plan years (1948-53), both Italian and American state and non-state agencies have commissioned hundreds of short films from private and public producers to promote modernization and industry and to govern the Italian people’s conduct. In the aftermath of the Second World War, these sponsored films aimed to spread campaigns about the programs of postwar reconstruction; in the 1950s, «short films continued to inform and educate Italian citizens about various aspects of their country’s progress towards modernization including industrialization, the mechanization of agriculture, housing, urban planning, and the spread of mass production»⁵. The decade of 1950 is a very particular period, comprising the birth of Italian democracy and the definitive entry into the economies of advanced capitalism; this implies complex economic, productive, and media dynamics. Interestingly, much of the cultural production of the second post-war era promotes humanism, somehow rejecting rhetorics of modernity and technology as legacies of the Fascist regime that celebrates and magnifies modernization and technology to enhance the anthropological and social conditions of the country. A large number of short film

3 T. Elsaesser, *Archives and Archaeologies: The Place of Non-Fiction Film in Contemporary Media*, in V. Hediger, P. Vonderau (eds.), *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, cit., p. 23.

4 C. R. Acland, H. Wasson, *Useful Cinema*, Duke University Press, Durham 2011, p. 3.

5 P. Bonifazio, *Schooling in Modernity: The Politics of Sponsored Films in Postwar Italy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2014, p. 3.

production companies took advantage of the law decree of October 1945, which reserved for them 3% of the gross income from the screenings; similarly, the laws of 1947 and 1949 allowed the producers to make remarkable profits if their short film was combined with a successful feature film. These films were usually short and did not exceed a 300-meter reel; then the so-called “Andreotti law” (law no. 958, on 29th December 1949) reserved an additional percentage for short films «of exceptional technical and cultural value», an incentive to shoot more and more often in color, and later also in Cinemascope, even in advance of feature films⁶. Many of the figures trained during the two decades of Fascist regime, under the banner of modernism, translate their experience into a new democratic vocation in a very complex discourse on continuity/break represented by the transition to democracy. «Finally, a more general consideration: the utility film confirms itself, also for the national context, as a particularly effective and profitable lens to understand the role of the medium from multiple perspectives»⁷.

The two case studies proposed hereby are documents that can illustrate far-reaching logics regarding Italian reconstruction and its declinations in the strategies of productivity, technological modernity, and civil pluralism.

Steel Tapes: A Network for People and Goods

Nastri d'acciaio [Steel Tapes]⁸ is a 1955 short film directed by Pino Belli, shot by Ettore Santoro on Ferraniacolor film⁹, edited by Mario Sansoni, and produced by Claudio Bartolucci. Title and credits appear on a painted background representing the freight yard that will be illustrated throughout the film, introducing a colorful visual framework. This film, in fact, describes the way the railways work and the activities of this kind of infrastructural hubs. It is one of the many documentaries that depicted the reconstruction of the railway network after the Second World War, an indispensable work for the revival of economic and social structures in Italy. Behind this film we can acknowledge media strategies that responded to the propaganda of a renewed Italy, to overcome the trauma of war. The

6 A. Aprà, *Primi approcci al documentario italiano*, in L. Micciché (a cura di), *Studi su dodici sguardi d'autore in cortometraggio*, Associazione Philip Morris Progetto Cinema, Lindau, Torino 1995, p. 287.

7 F. Pierotti, F. Pitassio, *Introduzione*, in F. Pierotti, F. Pitassio (a cura di), *Immagini industriali. Film e fotografia industriali nella cultura visuale italiana: interfaccia, evento, archivio (1945-1963)*, “Immagine: Note di Storia del Cinema”, 19, 2020, p. 10.

8 *Nastri d'acciaio* (P. Belli, 1955), colour, 265 m., 9' 11". The film is available at the YouTube channel of Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NBDShHH5bU>, last access on March 28th, 2021.

9 The Ferraniacolor is one of the color cinematography processes developed in Italy by Ferrania, a company in the province of Savona, which produced cinematographic films from the conversion of the factory of the Società Italiana Prodotti Esplosivi (SIPE). Ferraniacolor was the second (after the Ansco Color derived from the German Agfa Color) color process developed by Ferrania, based on the subtractive trichromatic monopack process, and it was used in cinema until the adoption of the Eastmancolor and Technicolor systems. Since the film had a sensitivity to light pretty low, the light conditions required were binding, thus it was ideal for outdoor shooting.

railway junction represents the process from the second industrial revolution that delivers Italy to modernity through two main metaphors: the reunion, which restored contact between distant cities and divided families, as well as the travel, a new path undertaken by Italy throughout the renewal of its infrastructural network. The train appeared in a wide set of films; in addition to serving as a symbol and playing a role in the cinematic imagery of cinema *tout court* from the Lumière onwards, it evokes the reworking of a discourse on travel and temporality¹⁰.

Nastri d'acciaio comes after many films sponsored by Ferrovie dello Stato (mainly between 1948 and 1953) and Breda (1952-1953)¹¹, and aims to illustrate the functions and the landscape of a typical freight yard, in a town that is not even mentioned, in the film and neither in its censorship clearance document, which states only: «The short film illustrates the feverish and orderly life of a large freight yard. Short film in Ferraniacolor»¹², plus the stamp «Documentary in color». The *incipit* of the film shows an extreme long shot, with the camera moving in pan, of the station, with its rails and trains, then another extreme long shot of the freight yard seen from another point, and an uneven tracking shot following a train. Meanwhile, a voice over comments the images declaiming words that sound more like a poem rather than an expected technical description of the tasks of a freight yard: «Freight yard: network of tracks shining in the sun, of electric cables in the sky. Parade of loaded or desolately empty wagons, their black mouths wide open to show the naked poverty of the interior. Silence and noises: clicks of switches, beating of signal bells, hoarse puffing of old locomotives, whistles of shunting [...]. Thus, night and day, in a concealed fervor, the great freight yard of the city lives, and the city is alive because it lives». This poetic dimension is deeply rooted in the pedagogical goal of such kind of film: «a poetic flight in the prosaic form of the documentary»¹³; on the visual realm, this *incipit* reminds the iconic rhythm of the city symphonies, the 1920s Avant-garde films dedicated to the metropolis, where the protagonists were trains, cars, city lights, etc. But soon the human labor takes its space: next to the rails and wagons, the workers swarm. The voice over acknowledges their expertise: «On the tangle of the bundles of tracks, that only the long experience of the railway staff knows how to use, thousands of tons of goods, day by day, arrive, depart, are absorbed as lifeblood by the concrete giant that breathes next to it»; workers are not only cogs in the system, but also the real engine, being an important part of the great works of reconstruction of Italy. Besides them, the railway police force helps as keeper of the goods and the healthy function of the freight yard. The role of music, composed by Costantino Ferri, is pivotal in the didactic strategy, since the cheer-

10 P. Bonifazio, *Schooling in Modernity*, cit., pp. 185-186.

11 G. Grasso, P. Villa, *In viaggio attraverso l'Italia. La ricostruzione ferroviaria nei documentari della Breda e delle Ferrovie dello Stato*, in F. Pierotti, F. Pitassio (a cura di), *Immagini industriali*, cit., pp. 65-85.

12 The content described in the censorship clearance document is available online on the database *Italia-taglia* at the following link: http://www.italiataglia.it/files/visti21000_wm_pdf/19197.pdf, last access on March 28th, 2021. From this document, we also know the length of the reel that was authorized by the Italian Prime Minister's Office (265 m).

13 P. Bonifazio, *Schooling in Modernity*, cit., p. 74.

ful *allegro* sounds of the orchestra convey atmospheres and positive sensations, evoking an idea of progressive constructiveness, well-being and serenity, alternating also with the noises of trains running on the tracks. The tone changes, towards more dramatic sounds and an adventure story *climax*, in the description of the most fictional sequence about the risks of theft, which can occur in the slowdown areas of the trains. Thefts are exorcised by the sudden intervention of the railway police, who monitors the entire system through dedicated stations and coordinates the intervention through telephones. The musical tension continues as we see policemen running among tracks and wagons, until the capture of the perpetrators, taken to the station, and until the recovery of the stolen goods. Then, the quiet is back, as well as the elegiac tone that accompanies the voice over, describing how the work of those who work on the railroad keeps going even at night, when «the moon casts glimmers on the steel ribbons of the tracks».

The film therefore wants to be the song of the renewal of the infrastructure on rails, those “steel tapes” that connect a country that intends to rise from a past of destruction.

Life of a Port: A Wide-Screen Genoa

Vita di un porto [Life of a Port]¹⁴, directed by Andrea Miano (not to be confused with Leonardo Algardi's 1957 film of the same name, dedicated to the port of Genoa as well)¹⁵, was shot by d.o.p. Osvaldo Piantini in Cinépanoramic format (Ferraniacolor film), written by Francesco Mastropietro, edited by Mario Sansoni and produced by Documento Film¹⁶. The documentary is a picturesque portrait of the industrious port of Genoa, in which the introductory overview of the coastline exemplarily combines the ancient beauty of the city of art, with its rich architectural heritage, with the modern industriousness of the lively and luminous port. The voice-over introduces the port throughout its history, declaiming: «Five hundred years before the advent of the Vulgar Era, Genoa was already born and this was already a port. In the wide stretch of water, safe behind the mountains, the centuries, in their succession, saw vessels of all kinds: triremes and caravels, tartans and galleons [...]. Ligurians, Carthaginians, Romans, Saracens, Normans [...]. Because the history of the port of Genoa is the history of the Mediterranean basin itself».

14 *Vita di un porto* (A. Miano, 1955), colour, anamorphic format Cinépanoramic, 260 m., 8' 48". The film is available at the YouTube channel of Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hny2uS7PRQ, last access on March 28th, 2021.

15 *Vita di un porto* (L. Algardi, 1957), black and white, 17'17", Cine-school section of Paravia, digitized by Fondazione Ansaldo. The film is available at the YouTube link of Genoa Municipality at the following link: - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGiMCbRhnuC>, last access on March 28th, 2021.

16 «The industrious life of a great port, that of Genoa with its gigantic plants and modern equipment, documented in all its aspects» is the content described in the censorship clearance document available online on the database *Italiataglia* at the following link: http://www.italiataglia.it/files/visti21000_wm_pdf/21014.pdf, last access on March 28th, 2021. From this document, we also know the length of the reel that was authorized by the Italian Prime Minister's Office (250 m).

Two previous documentaries about the renewal of the infrastructures in Genoa and nearby were already produced by Documento Film: *Scalo a Genova* (R. Marcellini, 1948) and *Costruire sul mare* (F. De Feo, 1953)¹⁷ were also funded by the Marshall Plan campaign¹⁸. In the mid-1950s, the port of Genoa is one of the most important harbors in Europe, with an annual traffic of about 12,000 ships of all sizes, with more than 200,000 passengers from all over the world, and the millions of tons of goods that are unloaded there, with its own railway station. All these numbers and data, declaimed by the voice over, define the port of Genoa as a powerful entity within Italian modern economy, where each sector has its own specialization and each dock has a destination. However, the narration of the activities of the port is accompanied by an explicit desire to exhibit a spectacle not only of the industrial processes, but also of its relationship with the landscape, outlining an effective identity icon, while the camera, shooting from the sea, involves the images in the gentle swaying of sea waves. The score contributes to such portrayal: the epic *crescendo* of the music, close to the mood of adventure movies, defines the grandeur of the port freight yard enterprise, combined with the magnitude of the visual experience guaranteed by the choice of a wide-screen format, which was predominant in Hollywood cinema in those years. Such a choice responds to the already mentioned governmental request for short documentaries «of exceptional technical and cultural value», in which the immersiveness of the visual technology could offer a captivating attractiveness to better engage the audience, enhancing the dimension of entertainment within films that were designed as educational tools. The Cinépanoramic¹⁹ was based on the system of anamorphosis, which in 1955 was pretty new but already spread in worldwide movie theatres: here it is used to valorize the sea landscape and the colors of the port. Colors that, due the specific characteristics of Ferraniacolor, had particular tones, more delicate than the visual saturation of Technicolor, thus suitable for a faithful cinematic reproduction of landscapes. Both the beautiful colors and the allure of the anamorphic format represent the visual counterpart to the poetic

17 Both the films are held in Archivio Centrale dello Stato. *Scalo a Genova* [Layover in Genoa] was sponsored by European Cooperation Administration, and focused on the conversion of the Italian ship Conte Biancamano as a cargo ship, whereas *Costruire sul mare* [Building on the Sea] probably sponsored by Mutual Security Agency Italy, was about the coal-and-steel center built in Conegliano, near Genoa.

18 The Marshall Plan was one of the largest economic aid programmes in history. Named after Secretary of State George C. Marshall, it consisted in the US government's intention to provide economic assistance to seventeen war-torn European countries to revive their economies and a more productive economic exchange with the U.S. It also included a propaganda campaign on a vast scale, covering all media, from radio broadcasts to exhibitions, newspapers, leaflets and posters to disseminate the message, but mostly films. Film, in fact, was considered the most persuasive medium of information, and played a key role in the campaign; thus, between 1948 and 1954 around 200 films were produced to promote the Marshall Plan to European audiences. See M. Fritsche, *The American Marshall Plan Film Campaign and the Europeans: A Captivated Audience?*, Bloomsbury Academic, London-New York 2018.

19 The Cinépanoramic was a 35mm anamorphic format with four perforations per frame, a French patent for an anamorphic format such as Twentieth Century Fox's CinemaScope, with a different aspect ratio (2.59:1, instead of the more standard 2.35:1 of CinemaScope). Both CinemaScope and Cinépanoramic required a shooting system based on so-called anamorphic lenses, capable of deforming images during filming and then disanamorphizing them during projection in order to obtain frames with a wider visual field, with a consequent immersive effect, without requiring larger film formats, such as 70mm, that would have been more expensive.

declamation of the voice over. In the ending, while the camera shows the landscape from a ship drifting away, the voice persists in combining lyrical details («then, on the water, only a trail of foam») with statements about the industrious and frantic life of a port that never sleeps, just like in *Nastri d'acciaio*.

Archive and restoration

The availability of archival funds and film collections has undoubtedly stimulated this growth of interest in industrial themes: among the many archives dedicated to these collections, a special place, in terms of quantity and quality, goes to the Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa, established in 2006 in Ivrea, which, with its digitization campaigns, has made thousands of industrial films and audiovisuals available to scholars.

The collaboration with the archives made accessible films that represent sources able to enrich the historiographical debate.

In particular, the digitization of these two films (together with other eight reels of other titles of the same years) has been conducted by the laboratory²⁰ on behalf of Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa for the purposes of the HERA research project ViCTOR-E.²¹

The conservation status of some of the reels was in degradation, thus acidity tests were run to monitor the possible cases of vinegar syndrome²². Then, all the phases of cleaning and repairing of perforations and splices were documented by photos to make them reversible, according to the documentation protocols that list all the interventions on the original materials. Moreover, *Vita di un porto* obviously required the anamorphic correction that was performed before the color grading, following the ethical guidelines and the laboratory protocols. In fact, all the interventions were aimed at compensating the degradation of the materials or the mistake range of the automatic color correction made by the Cintel-Black Magic scanner, plus the correction of the anamorphic deformation, in order to make the image readable and proportionate, as they were supposed to be seen through the proper screening lenses of the projector. Some distortions are still visible due to the lens used in shooting, that keeps warping the image in certain perspectives.

20 The whole work has been conducted by the technician Alessandro Russo, at La Camera Ottica laboratory, under the supervision of Rossella Catanese and Cosetta Saba (associate professor, head of La Camera Ottica lab),

21 VICTOR-E is the acronym for *Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration and Reconstruction in Post-WW II Europe*, an international research project that explores non-fiction films about the reconstruction of Europe in the years 1945-1956. It is a collaborative research project of Goethe University Frankfurt am Main (Germany), Università degli Studi di Udine (Italy), Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (Czech Republic), and Université Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne (France), in cooperation with the Deutsches Filminstitut und Filmmuseum Frankfurt, the Centre National de la Cinématographie Paris, the National Film Archive in Prague, the Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa in Ivrea, and the Association des Cinémathèques Européennes (ACE). One of the outcomes of this collaboration between film scholars and archives will be a virtual exhibition on the portal European Film Gateway.

22 Vinegar Syndrome is a chemical of degradation that occurs with cellulose acetate film, which releases acetic acid and is characterized by a persistent vinegar smell.

All this work allowed a direct confrontation with the materiality of the artifacts, whose peculiarities have important historical and aesthetic values. Therefore, primary sources on the history of Italian post-war reconstruction have been valorized, thanks to a profitable collaboration with the archives to preserve the films and to guarantee their wide accessibility through the digital realm. A new life and circulation for these industrial poems of the mid-1950s Italy.