



The sky in a factory

by Pierluigi Battista

► **AT THE CENTER OF THE LITERATURE AND MOVIES OF THE 1960S, FACTORIES – THE SYMBOL OF MANUFACTURING – REFLECTED ITALY AND ITS CHANGES FOR A LONG TIME. BUT THEN LABOR CHANGED, AND SO DID HOW TO NARRATE IT**

In the heart of the 1960s, literature and movies denounced the alienation of large factories, but today the relentless and painful disappearance of large factories is mourned about. In Paolo Volponi's *Memorial*, the most representative book of Italian industrial fiction, the working class in large factories played a central role, symbolizing a

wildly changing Italy. Today, a novel by Antonio Pennacchi, called *Mammoth*, was published again, in which the mammoths are workers, a rough pagan race now extinct; and movies celebrate precarious laborers, the unemployed, the poor – people with no physical and sociological home. In the mid-1960s, in *The Boss*, Goffredo Parise described Italy

as a country where life was hard, but looking to the future. Today's cinema and literature describe Italian life as very hard, but all absorbed in a hopeless present.

Rocco and His Brothers, a film by Luchino Visconti, was the story of Southerners moving north to manufacturing jobs and modernity, carrying cardboard suitcases. It was a strongly emotional drama showing no consolation, education or narrative sweetening. Above all, there was no happy ending. Visconti depicted the harshness of large migration flows moving adventurously from the South, on the route to Italy's so-called 'industrial triangle,' in an exodus that radically changed the face of the country and its cities from North to South. A predominantly peasant country, which the war had destroyed, humiliated and impoverished, had become a predominantly industrial society in a few years. A wealthier lifestyle finally seemed an achievable goal for millions of Italians who could barely make ends meet until a few years before; who were living in hovels without electricity and running water, as in the Southern town of Matera; and who were exposed to disease, malnutrition and real poverty. Intellectuals, perfectly in line with the best cosmopolitan *intelligentsia*, were throwing fiery accusations to 'spreading consumerism,' but



Above: *Rocco and His Brothers*.
Opposite page: *The Working Class Goes to Heaven*





in day-to-day Italy, appliances were releasing millions of women from back-breaking toil, and refrigerators made it possible to store foods that were unknown until shortly before. Movies and literature observed these huge changes perhaps before politicians. A film such as *The Easy Life*, an Italian on-the-road movie, would have been impossible, had mass vacationing and widespread motorization not been achieved. A lot of Italian-style comedy movies would not have represented such a colossal anthropological change, connected to the tumultuous growth of Italy, also for the purpose of lambasting it and its baseness. Take the greedy building speculators portrayed in *We All Loved Each Other So Much*, a film by Ettore Scola, or other movies, such as *Il Boom* or

One Million Dollars. Italian workers joined large industries *en masse*, little by little becoming consumerist consumers, and savers. They began to crowd beaches, clog roads and new highways, buy economy cars, fill homes with items that were unthinkable until shortly before, among which the television set, the centerpiece which transformed Italy and Italians most radically – an eternal source of possibilities, feelings, ideas, projects and aspirations. And crime, too. Piombino, a small town in Tuscany, must have been something like that when a steel factory dominated the landscape and the mental habits of those who lived around the factory's huge production facilities. The dein-

dustrialization of Piombino, the end of a world, its existential disintegration is reflected in the pages of *Swimming to Elba*, a book by Silvia Avallone, a young writer with a strong sociological imagination. Industrial fiction is becoming post-industrial, not by choice, but because manufacturing and the factory are dissolving and losing their central role in the emotional and mental identity of Italians (as is happening in the rest of the world, for that matter). There remains regret for a lost world, however, as in the pages of Edoardo Nesi's *Story of My People*, where the small Italian factories of Prato vanish in the pain of an irreparable loss. Or even in *Ternitti*, by Mario Desiati, which belies the stereotype of the South as totally unaware of the existence of workers

and industrial culture. As for movies, precariousness has become the subject of a genre in its own right, a quasi-comedy genre with fixed roles, masks, idiosyncrasies and language. But vacuum, in society as well as in nature, does not exist. So, what did take the place of industry in movies and literary works? In fact, the popularity of working class themes and big industry stories was reflected in a myriad ways to represent those themes and stories for years: denunciation and mythization in *The Working Class Goes to Heaven*; the intimate and melancholic insight in *Come Home and Meet My Wife*; and typification of oddball characters, which have nonetheless kept alive the creativity of the Italian-style comedy, as in *The Seduction of Mimi*, a creation of Lina Wertmuller. And then what? And then there is no such thing as the shift in aesthetic gaze that could be seen in the transition from rural to industrial. There is no gaze without prejudice in

the tumultuous transition from the world of industry to the world of service providers, of small businesses, of self-employment, of a middle class that is gradually displacing manufacturing workers from their central sociological role as they shrink in mentality and number. If large factories carry respect and consideration, the variegated universe of warehouses, and the thousands and thousands of small businesses that dot the landscape are taken only as targets of social invective. Once upon a time the middle class being ridiculed for its alleged 'pettiness' was the clerical class, along with anything that was associated with it even with some degree of arbitrariness. The literary tone was set by the unforgettable pages of Sinclair Lewis, as early as in 1928, describing small-town America with well-cut gray suits, sparkling clean and comfortable houses, and sexless wives, as anemic nuns, well-represented by Babbitt, its hero, the personification of pet-

ty-bourgeois narrow-mindedness, conformist obtuseness without any greatness, a feature that is always blamed on any such class without class identity by the most fervent workerists of our culture. But if one should ask, what movie, what novel has sought to offer a non-derogatory representation of today's self-employed temporary workers, the answer could only be desolately univocal: no movie, no novel. Rather, all contemporary aesthetics keep endlessly reshaping the eternal damnation of this middle class referred to as greedy, rude, vulgar, and obsessed with the fetishism of money, success, and an expensive and wasteful lifestyle. It is as if the new middle class of self-employment, small factories and temporary workers were to be blamed for the disappearance of the old – and reassuring – working class. And not the real working class, but a mythologized one. In truth, Italy does not even have an artist like Ken Loach, who is able to create powerful monuments to the past and its illusions, a sort of solemn bow to the icons of an inevitably exhausted tradition. The lament for a lost world is more easily associated with blindness to new social realities, as if we should focus on indignation rather than trying to understand or represent them. The call of great business – the large industry, the large factory – has waned. Novels do not talk about it anymore. In the meantime, in one of the great cathedrals of Italian industry, Fiat's former Lingotto factory, a book fair (and a 'taste fair') is held every year. Post-modernity has definitely already arrived, and become an established institution.



Above: *The Easy Life*.
Opposite page: *The Seduction of Mimi*