

The politics of spectatorship in the *Tree of Wooden Clogs*

Ian Dwayne Pettigrew, iandwpettigrew@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This article reassesses the politics of Ermanno Olmi's 1978 *Palme d'Or* winner, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. It specifically addresses charges made against the film by the novelist and critic, Alberto Moravia. The Marxist writer asserted that the film promotes the life and ideology of the farmers featured in the work. By looking closely at the film, I demonstrate how the formal strategies utilized by Olmi negate Moravia's assessment and controvertibly position spectators to re-evaluate their political relationships to those in their range of influence.

Keywords: Ermanno Olmi; Neo-Realism; Alberto Moravia; Political Cinema; and Viewer Responsibility



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The politics of spectatorship in the *Tree of Wooden Clogs*

Ian Dwayne Pettigrew

Although it did win substantial acclaim upon its release, including the *Palme D'or* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1978 and the New York Film Critics Circle Award in 1979, several influential critics and cultural commentators openly questioned *The Tree of Wooden Clog's* politics at the time. As Jonathan Keates suggests, it “Seems that Olmi’s compatriots are more interested in his reluctance to toe certain approved political or ideological lines than in his merits as a filmmaker” (Jonathan Keates, 1988). A majority of the negative discussion surrounding *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* pitted Olmi’s work against Bertolucci’s nearly six-hour epic *1900*, released two years previously in 1976. Although Bertolucci’s Marxist allegiance resolutely frames his film and its portrayal of peasants, farmers, and wealthier economic classes, it never preaches didactically but makes its position clear. Like Olmi’s film, it also begins in turn of the century Italy, but continues through World War II.

However, there was never a real feud between Olmi and Bertolucci. In fact, few similarities actually exist between the films beyond the eras in which they are set and the peasants featured in both works. Instead Olmi’s most vociferous critic was the Marxist novelist and cultural critic Alberto Moravia. Moravia felt *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* advocates an attitude of humble passivity. But a close look at Olmi’s film will demonstrate that the charges raised against the film by the famed author are groundless. Examining Olmi’s direction in a close reading of the work, I will controvertibly demonstrate how the style of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* actually stresses our role as spectators, inviting a political reassessment in respect to our own communities.

Alberto Moravia's misreading of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*

Moravia's article entitled "Ora basta, disse il cavallo" (Enough now, says the horse) accused Olmi's film of employing humble hero character types he felt were common in canonical Italian literature. He cited the works of classical Italian authors such as Verga, Goldoni and Manzoni as evidence for his claims. He then continues to offer his view of the film as reinforced by what he sees as Olmi's Catholic ideology. In his description of the film's events he ignores all evidence of the political connotations of the film's style. "The ideology of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* is Manzonian" he writes, "that is it looks at farming culture as a model, with admiration and approval, attempting to adopt its vision of the world" (Alberto Moravia, 1978, p.154-156).

This is a complete misreading of the film and also of Manzoni. Yes, Manzoni's *Betrothed* does reflect a distinctly Catholic worldview, but this perspective indicts those in power, including those in prominent leadership positions in the church such as the Nun of Monza. Olmi does look at the farmers with admiration and does not portray the Catholic faith in negative tones (although Don Carlo is mostly powerless to help the peasants in their struggles), but he does not do any of this with nostalgia nor to pine for a lifestyle that leaves the workers powerless in the face of their landlord's temperament. Although the farmers' way of life may have a particular beauty that appeals to us from the manner in which their labor, family, and spiritual beliefs coalesce in the core of their home, the film counters this placid aesthetic with its vivid and troubling depiction of the peasants' quotidian struggle to make ends meet.

“Most films subvert culture because they encourage evasion of responsibility”

A factor that may have led Moravia and other critics to misread the film’s politics is the shift in Olmi’s style in *Tree of Wooden Clogs* from his previous feature films. An editing style that blends past, present, possible futures, and the imaginary characterizes much of the rest of Olmi’s fictional filmography prior to this work (e.g. *The Fiancés* [1963], *One Fine Day* [1969], *In the Summertime* [1971], and *The Circumstance* [1974]). But *Tree of Wooden Clogs* features a strictly linear narrative, albeit one that jumps between the stories of four families. For some audiences, the film’s style itself may have felt regressive through the adoption of a simpler and seemingly less demanding style. However, this structure serves the purpose of highlighting the painterly form of many of the film’s images. Although the images, set in the handsome northern Italian countryside, impress us with their beauty, they also evoke the past through their form in a way that reiterates oppression’s cyclical nature. Olmi composes this aesthetic against the horrifying injustices we witness the farmers endure, using the painterly images’ historical weight as a reminder that the unjust treatment of peasants and workers has occurred continually throughout history into the present.

These injustices accumulate until the work’s upsetting conclusion, filmed with observational extended long takes of the Batistì family as they are evicted from their home. From seemingly helpless point-of-view shots we watch as the livestock the family has taken care of for years is suddenly seized from them, and they set out with no proposed direction, homeless, with all of their possessions on a cart. Leaving the resolution for this maltreatment to us, the film refuses to conform to the wishes of those who would like to see these abuses righted on screen. But the film does subtly suggest several possible responses through the education of the Batistì’s oldest son and also in its depiction of the soap-box politician heard

during the festival and the revolutionaries seen during Maddalena (Lucia Pezzoli) and Stefano's (Franco Pilegna) honeymoon trip to Milan.

The director's political leanings bear mentioning here. Although in his interviews and writing Olmi displays sympathies with the left, others in the film and arts' communities of Italy have viewed his works suspiciously because of his overt Catholicism. In his films themselves, Olmi demonstrates his stated suspicion of any work that seeks to take political responsibility away from his viewers. In response to an interviewer who told him his films "will always seem difficult because people are not trained to 'read' images," he stated

No. The problem is not one of comprehension. The public wants to evade reality because any reality portrayed on the screen demands that the spectator take responsibility for it. The average spectator is so reluctant to do so that if he actually saw himself there, he would deny that the character corresponded to him... Most films subvert culture because they encourage evasion of responsibility. In my view, society must be made up of responsible men, for those who do not take responsibility for their own lives are ripe to be led by a dictator. (Ermanno Olmi, 1987, p.104)

Olmi's commitment to creating films that invite responsible viewership guides his style, whether in the fashion of *The Fiancés*, which fuses the past, present, and possible futures together of a discontented couple through radical editing, or as in the painterly long takes and observational point-of-view shots of *Tree of Wooden Clogs*.

The *Tree of Wooden Clogs* and Neo-Realism

Tree of Wooden Clogs is episodic, not exactly in the manner of Rossellini's *The Flowers of Saint Francis* (1950), but in its telling of certain events from the lives of each of the four families that live in the *cascina* (farmhouse). Whereas Rossellini's film relates several relatively disconnected narratives in the lives of St. Francis and his acolytes, Olmi has

interwoven the stories between his film's characters, cutting back and forth between each of the four households. The stories unfold through the duration of the film, which begins and ends with the Batistis.

After the opening scene with Batisti (Luigi Ornaghi) and his wife (Francesca Moriggi), the film proudly reaffirms its Neo-Realist associations in its desire to recreate a past reality. Accompanied by the music of Bach, the film's preamble reads, "Acted in by farmers and people from the Bergamo countryside. This is the way a Lombardian farmhouse should have appeared at the end of the last century. Four or five families of farmers would live here... The house, stalls, land, the trees, part of the animals and tools were owned by a landlord and to him were also owed two parts of a harvested crop".

The directness of the preamble, followed by Batisti weighing the priest's (Carmelo Silva) recommendation to send Minec (Omar Brignoli) to school, immediately frames the film to be viewed with a political eye. Continuing in the Neo-Realist tradition, the film opens with a social problem the Batisti family seeks to solve themselves, but we soon see that the economic system they live in prevents them, or their children, from escaping their hardship filled lives by themselves. By the conclusion, remembering that many of the actors themselves are farmers or ordinary citizens, we recognize that the purpose of the film is not to indulge in nostalgia for the elegantly pastoral form of life humbly led by these people, but to review the extra-cinematic world that we and these individuals face. Olmi's demands that his viewers remain responsible for the world we recognize in the film require that we not remain passive when we witness similar conditions in our own societies and communities.

Spectators to suffering

We cannot deny that *L'albero degli zoccoli* adorns the lives of the farmers through the tranquil selections of Bach that color the families' emotions and spiritual ties to their work, the joy on the faces of the farmers during the evenings they sit listening to stories or singing, the laughter of the children, and the film's painterliness that seemingly vivifies the works of Van Gogh or Claude Lorrain. Before the film familiarizes us with any of the four principal stories, we are immersed in this world by watching the farmers till dirt, harvest corn, the fascination the children have with a new born foal, and then the alarming beheading of a goose.

After several beautiful scenes, the abruptness of this brutality stuns us. Immediately following a shot of children jollily jumping in the hay, a cut takes us to the courtyard of the *cascina*, and a large goose runs squawking across the screen. Children enter the shot, yelling, "Get her" until they corner her against a wall and one of the older boys hands the bird to Finard (Battista Trevaini). Initially, the capture of the goose appears frolicsome. Bach's music bridges the moment to the pleasant scenes preceding it and the film does not make an abrupt change in style to emphasize the beheading's harshness. The long takes and long shots that established the setting are again utilized here. Nothing signals or foreshadows the sudden violence that occurs.

The children follow Finard over to a log stump, reassuring one another and expressing their fear that the animal may bite. Quickly, Finard lays the goose's neck across the stump and with a swift blow, beheads the bird and then bleeds its neck into the dirt. When the farmer calls out for a container for the blood, a quick cut to the youngest Batistì child registers the boy's distress at witnessing death, simultaneously suggesting that this way of life encompasses his comprehension of the cycles of life, death, and what it means to work and provide food to feed the family. However, this early sequence also prepares us to envision this world as less than

ideal. Unless we oppose the use of animals for food, this incident does not present a moral problem. But this sequence initiates a pattern of watching suffering that prefigures the position of spectators within and without the diegetic world of *Tree of Wooden Clogs* throughout the work.

Around 40 minutes later when a pig is slaughtered and hung upside down to bleed out, the youngest Batisti child watches again with several other children. The boy finally turns away as the farmers cut open the animal's neck. The camera's perspective and the film's editing design repeat an observational style in this scene, rarely moving into close-ups of the gutted pig or to show emotions on the faces of the farmers¹. This pattern mimics our own relatively detached spectatorship of the film's families and the trials they endure. As we continue to view these rougher images displayed in the same painterly manner as the more beautiful scenes, the film attunes us to our passive position as spectators.

Further delineating the spectator's vision, Olmi presents us with the landlord's (Mario Brignoli) point-of-view, providing a pretext for the riots witnessed in Maddalena's and Stefano's trip to Milan through a detailed social milieu. After shyly announcing his desire to court Maddalena, one evening, Stefano and two other suitors join in the nightly gathering of the farmers at the *cascina*. Coupled with the scene that follows, Olmi contrasts the wealth and abundance held by the landlord's family with the poverty of the peasants. But concurrently he joins our perspective firstly with the curious Stefano and then the landlord's, who removed

¹ In a moment that may have served as a source of inspiration for these scenes in *Tree of Wooden Clogs*, at the end of Olmi's *The Circumstance* a similar sequence exhibits cows on a contemporary farm in 1970s Italy being slaughtered. The editing structure of the scene frames the violence of the cows being shot in the head against the malaise of Tomasso, a son in an affluent middle class family.

from his family, seems distant and withdrawn as he peers in through a window watching others enjoy music together.

As Stefano and the other suitors enter the small stall where the families are gathered, Maddalena's parents nod and wink at one another identifying which boy attempts to court their daughter. In tightly framed shots, the peasant families huddle together in the congested room amongst the cows as they feed. Batistì hears music and then invites everyone to come outside and listen to pipers they can hear playing at the landlord's house. Their satisfied murmurings affirm that the musicians are performing as part of a Christmas tradition. Several close-ups display the parents holding their children peacefully alongside Anselmo (Giuseppe Brignoli) with his granddaughter, who voices her amazement at the appearance of the moon. He cites a traditional proverb as he holds her in his arms, "Haze around the moon, snow is coming soon". When he tells his granddaughter that the saying means, "The earth needs snow", a pair of reaction shots show the two young lovers stealing careful glances at one another. Despite the barren and rough surroundings, we sense the warm affection shared between the humble families and their friends as they gladly listen to the festive music under the night sky.

When Stefano walks home he hears a composition by Mozart played on the piano from the landlord's house and he peeks beyond the gate to have a closer look at how the other side lives. Never venturing further than the shadowy yard to see the source of the music himself, the young man watches as the landlord glances inside of the window, shots interchanging between Stefano watching and the focus of his curious attention. Alerted by the dogs, the landlord demands to know who stands in his yard, but Stefano rushes off.

The camera remains with the landlord and grants us his perspective of the inside of his luxurious home. The few moments of the film we spend with him, he is never vilified beyond instigating the investigation into the felled tree immediately before the film's conclusion. We do not see him treat anyone harshly or even give the command to evict the Batisti family. He is remote not only from the peasants, but also, the *mise en scène* indicates, from his own family and friends. Through point of view shots, the landlord's perspective shows us, through a barred window, a room of elegantly dressed people sitting in an amply spaced room and listening to a young man playing piano. Close-ups of their faces reveal the presence of a much more somber tone than that felt at the *cascina*. Olmi gives us no reasons to dislike these people, but following the cramped quarters recently witnessed at the *cascina*, the *mise en scène* generates awareness of the disparity between classes in this community and we can understand the rebels' anger later on and the needs of the audience spoken to by the politician at the festival.

We do not see the landlord interact with these people or almost anyone else. Passive spectator figures, like the landlord, reoccurringly appear throughout Olmi's cinema. These characters disengage themselves from the rest of society, refusing to form meaningful relationships even with those who make efforts to associate with them. Olmi also visually characterizes *Il Posto's* (1961) budding writer and the unnamed, lonely artist from the advertising agency in *One Fine Day* in a manner that highlights their aloof points-of-view. However, the remoteness of these two individuals did not directly affect others' having shelter and enough food to eat. Although curious and observant of the lives around him, like Olmi's other passive spectator characters, the landlord's detachment engenders his inability to care about the farmers' welfare. The emphasis Olmi places here on spectatorship and our

responsibility as viewers begs us to consider the lives of the famers and to gauge our own responses to actual suffering and need in comparison with the landlord's.

The Widow Runk

Two of the families at the *cascina* withstand particularly arduous trials in the film: the widow Runk's household and the Batistis. The Widow Runk (Teresa Brescianini) struggles just to feed her many children and keep a roof over their heads. And even though her father and son both assist her efforts, the family barely subsists. Following the butchering of the pig, Don Carlo (Carmelo Silva) visits the *cascina* to call on the widow. Although sympathetic to their trials, Don Carlo is also a spectator to the suffering of the peasants. He does not have any practical methods to alleviate the conditions of the families. His only offer of aid to the widow is that she send the two youngest of her six children to an orphanage.

Although Don Carlo is an official representative of their faith, the peasants' very personal relationship with their God is ingrained in their work. This relationship encourages them to have faith, but to also rely on their own labour to benefit from God's blessings. We see the kindling of this faith the night the widow speaks to her oldest son about the priest's proposal.

While the rest of the family eats their dinner in front of the fire, Anselmo, the widow's father, regales the children with a story of how sparks flying from fires exist as beings who have escaped from hell in search of other souls. One of his granddaughters interjects that good people frighten devils and the grandfather asks them if they say their prayers. When they reply affirmatively, he playfully hits the burning wood with a rod to prove to his grandchildren that they scare the fiery devils with their goodness. As he hits the rod, the camera moves into a

close-up of the sparks, granting us the perspective of a child whose formative worldview intertwines faith and God with the natural world.

Crossing to the other side of the table in the small home, we then see the attitude this worldview fosters in a child as he or she reaches adulthood. The widow explains the priest's proposal to her oldest son. When he hears of Don Carlo's suggestion, the boy is dismayed, but he submits other possibilities that would allow them to keep the two youngest children, finally resolving that he will work day and night and do whatever he can to keep his brother and sister with them. There is no magical realism here or a *deus ex machina* that materializes to solve the burdensome financial concerns of the Runk family. The myth spun by Anselmo mesmerizes the children and bolsters their spiritual connection to their work and the world that surrounds them, but the benevolence, faith, and goodwill of these people will not in themselves put food on the table. Work is intimately connected with the ineffable in the world of the peasants.

In a compelling scene that highlights our agency as spectators (which also reiterates the families' distinct blend of religion with nature and work) the Runk's cow heals miraculously. The widow firmly understands the event as a miracle, and the depiction of the event, keeping with the rest of the film's style, also grants us that possibility if we choose to read the scene that way, but in no way is this happening displayed supernaturally. The cow stops eating and lackadaisically lies in her stall, prompting the widow to call upon a veterinarian. He advises her to butcher the animal immediately and sell the beef while it is still good. Not willing to give up, the widow washes out a wine bottle, and walks hurriedly to the church, pleading to God aloud for his help and detailing the dire circumstances she finds herself in since her husband has died. A final prayer she begins at the church carries over through a sound bridge into a subsequent shot while she dips the bottle into a creek, begging God to bless the water with the



ability to heal and demanding desperately that He help her in this situation. Determined she returns to the cow's stall, grabs its horn to tilt its head back, jams the bottle into its mouth, and repeats the Lord's Prayer.

A morning arrives when one of the daughters jolts out to the widow washing clothes at the creek to tell her that the cow stands. When the widow sees the cow on its feet with her own eyes she walks over to a picture of the Madonna and Child and kneels before it, offering her gratitude. But the sequence never confirms the widow's belief that the act was a miracle through the use of music, further discussion of the incident, or any conventional device such as a glowing halo or a vaselined lens. Comparing the scene to traditional visual depictions of miracles, the scene is notably bereft of any preternatural signifiers that would typically mark sacred occurrences. Instead, Olmi offers a pictorial long take of the widow kneeling before the likeness of a saint to thank God, a relatively bucolic image that reiterates the peasant's belief system.

Through the absence of the priest from this scene, the film accentuates the personal faith of the peasants and their determination to work for God's blessings. But whether this incident can be attributed to an act of God or not, the widow's financial situation remains burdensome. Even with an event she may comprehend as a tender mercy of God, she will still struggle to feed her children. Our access to this event emphasizes the necessity for further practical action even in a world where God may intercede.

The Batistì Family

The hardships faced by the Batistì family are in many ways the centerpiece of the four stories told in *Tree of Wooden Clogs*. The film begins and ends with a dilemma that is

impossible for them to solve on their own. By the film's conclusion our role as witnesses to their situation questions our compassion and willingness to intervene in the politics of our own realities. At the film's introduction, Batisti openly contests Don Carlo's instructions to send Minec to school because he and his wife are almost ready to welcome another child into their family and the boy could assist them with their workload around the *cascina*.

The pastor suggests that the family let providence take care of whatever worries they may hold about making ends meet and that the boy will provide for his family when he has completed his education. The suggestion to allow providence to provide may be the trigger to Batisti later cutting down the tree to equip his son with shoes. And while Don Carlo is clearly well intentioned, his advice remains mostly impractical, offering the peasants no direct counsel to improve their lowly stations in life.

To arrive at school, the boy walks a few miles each day by himself in clothes inadequate for the harsh, cold weather of a northern Italian winter. When he returns home his parents remove his wet clothes and set him by the fire as he eats his meager dinner. Minec amazes his parents with what he tells them of his days at school, his descriptions of microscopic entities sounding like magic. Although they seem pleased with their child's education, Batisti remains anxious, especially after his wife gives birth.

When Minec's shoe splits in half at school, the boy tries to fix it by himself at first by unfastening the rope he uses as a belt and tying it around his shoe to hold it together. His temporary solution quickly falls apart when he makes his way to the muddy road and he decides to remove his sock and shoe and walk home with one foot bare. This misfortune occurs

on the day Minec's new brother is born and when the boy returns home his father instructs him not to say anything to his mother about the broken clog.

Night falls and Batisti puts on his cloak, with hatchet concealed, and tells his two sons that he needs to go out for a moment before he heads to the side of the creek to obtain lumber. After selecting the tree he will fell, he starts chopping off undesirable limbs and branches from the upper half, consistently looking around to ensure he remains unseen. After the wood breaks and falls, he gathers enough to craft a new shoe for his son, not more than three feet in length, and stows it under his cloak.

He returns home and as his wife says the nightly prayers with the children before they go to sleep, Batisti repeats the prayers nervously pacing around the room and then clandestinely looks out the window to ascertain if anyone followed him. Still able to hear his wife's calling segment of the prayer when he begins to head down the ladder from their sleeping quarters and into the living room, he continues to recite the responding side of the prayer while he cuts the wood for Minec's shoe. Clearly, the reason he has gathered the wood secretly and without consulting with his wife is only because he fears punishment by his landlord, and not because he senses any conflict between this action and his understanding of God's Commandments.

As we view Batisti's act of craftsmanship, recall the goose and pig butchering, and witness the peasants' spiritual devotion to their faith through seeing and hearing their prayers, the film reminds us that these men and women are not professional actors, but actual farmers and artisans as proclaimed in the film's introduction. These actions are realized in real time, captured in long takes that appreciate their skills and talents. These performances also remind us that the actors and actresses of the film likely face similar hardships to the ancestors they are

portraying. French Catholic priest and film critic Amédée Ayfre makes an insightful link between a style similar to Olmi's approach in this sequence and Bazin's theories on 'reality' in film. He suggests that Neo-Realist filmmakers need not be great philosophers to produce works that can phenomenologically represent the 'real'. He argues that the condition for this representation to occur is "That the event has been allowed to conserve its completeness. The slightest intrusion of any treatment whereby the author tends to make his personal interpretation of the intrinsic meaning explicit compromises the whole operation." (Amedee Ayfre, 1985, p.188)

Ayfre feels that this permits the viewer freedom. He states "It is striking to note how the filmmaker places us face to face with a human event taken in its totality, but refrains from fragmentation or analysis, simply surveying it, describing it concretely and working in such a way that in the midst of watching we lose the sense of spectacle and the awareness of acting in the actors disappears." (Ayfree, p.184). Watching *Batistì* with the hardships he faces in mind, as we witness him measure the broken shoe against the wood, begin cutting, and then shaping the new clog, we begin to see him as a 'real' person and our non-diagetic vision expands.

As the film arrives to its climax, the landlord does not even exit from his carriage when he suspects that someone has chopped down a tree on his property without his consent. Instead, he sends the bailiff to investigate the scene. Our own observation of the punishment that the landlord and the bailiff mete out comes from the perspective of the other families who first discuss the implications of the incident with the tree and then witness the swift eviction of the *Batistì* family. This perspective restates the film's construction, underscoring our witnessing of the injustice that takes place before us.

After Anselmo returns home from selling his tomatoes in the village with one of his granddaughters a somber air permeates the widow Runk's home until he feels compelled to ask what happened. The widow tells her father of the eviction, that the family must leave by morning with all of their possessions. Fear and a deep grief tinge their conversation about the supposed crime, leading to Anselmo's pronouncement that this means, "Taking the bread away from those people".

When the hooves of the bailiff's horse are heard, Olmi cuts to the Finard home that is filled with the same sense of unease as the widow's. Neither family exits its home, but observes the events from its own windows and doorways and the film cuts back and forth between both homes, establishing and displaying each family's point-of-view. They watch as the officer loads the landlord's animals that Batisti has cared for onto and behind the cart, Finard's wife lamenting "those poor people. They have nothing left now." When Batisti loads his few remaining possessions, we also view the disgraced farmer from the vantage of Maddalena and Stefano's home. The families do not even bid farewell to those departing, seemingly afraid and at a complete loss as to the appropriate course of action.

Any understanding that argues the film persuades us to adopt the worldview of the farmers has been a severe misreading of this work. As the family leaves in tears with no stated destination, shame falls on the other families for their lack of action and for simply watching people they have worked with for years turned out of their homes for nothing. By not doing anything they contradict the ethical principles of their background and existence as farmers who rely on one another for support in all aspects of their lives. However, the film does not provide a ready answer as to what their collective response should be. At this point, the film

invites intense scrutiny and thought through its augmenting awareness of our gaze on these events. It also demands a consideration of possible solutions to the peasant's problems presented on the perimeters of the farmers' stories.

The courtship, wedding, and revolutionary honeymoon of Maddalena and Stefano

The film contains several deliberately obscure responses to the abuse and hardship unfairly meted out to the peasant families. These possible reactions stay in line with the film's observational approach, often leaving questions unanswered such as who the rebels are we see in the streets of Milan during Maddalena and Stefano's honeymoon, or the affiliation and goals of the soap box politician heard during the town's annual festival. Olmi's style refrains from commenting on these events beyond including them as slight tangents from the stories, but they do grant us a glimmering view of hope in light of the tragedies witnessed.

We see firsthand the response of some to the negligence of society towards peasants during the film's honeymoon sequence. At Maddalena and Stefano's wedding the priest suggests the journey they will make that day holds danger and warns them of people's "strange ideas." The newlyweds then board a boat to take them by river to Milan.² Upon entering the city, the passengers spot a plume of smoke arising from their destination. Although many speculate that it may just be a bonfire, another priest onboard worries that it may be demonstrators.

² The scenes in Milan were actually shot in Pavia, which had changed very little in the seventy-eight years since the setting of the film.

The first impressions given of Milan, besides the smoke seen while on the boat, reflect its commercialism. Peddlers rush out to greet them as they alight on land, and subsequent shots display men selling their wares as we hear prices negotiated, and shouts of sales from the soundtrack. At a crosswalk across an alley, a group of soldiers leading young men in chains stops the couple in their tracks. Maddalena and Stefano look on with confusion and curiosity as the soldiers and prisoners walk by until the road clears and they can pass through. Seconds later, walking on another street, other pedestrians tell them that the soldiers have blocked the road ahead. Along their detour the commotion of the army racing by on horses and fearful exclamations of “They’re going to shoot,” force the newlyweds and other citizens under the shelter of a doorway until the dust settles.

The film offers us the naïve perspective of Maddalena and Stefano in Milan, declining to provide information about the riot or the rioters. Names are not mentioned for us to associate the rebels with thinkers or specific movements, and neither side is displayed in a particularly villainous light. As the scene occurs our interest is invested in Maddalena and Stefano and we only hope they will arrive safely at the nunnery where they will stay. Maddalena and Stefano’s wedding signifies a new hope for the families. We carry a suspicion that their exposure to these events opens their minds to possible recourses in response to future hardships inflicted because of their low class status.

After reaching the nunnery of Maddalena’s aunt, Sister Maria, a nun greets them and ushers them into a dining room where they observe the orphan toddlers who reside there. Later that night they walk through the children’s sleeping quarters, and the nun pronounces, “With the children in here the world is much more beautiful”. In the morning, the Sister enters with a

child in arms. She encourages them to adopt the one-year-old boy, Giovanni Battista (John the Baptist), promising financial reimbursement from the boy's family that the nunnery receives. Maddalena holds the child and tacitly agrees to bring Giovanni home with them.

Once they have returned to the *cascina*, the families gather around a table together with Don Carlo as he prepares to read with them the documents accompanying the new addition to the household. He affirms the nun's statements, establishing the financial relationship assumed to come with the child until Giovanni reaches the age of 15. But the final statement made by the priest, before a cut is made to the landlord's discovery of Battista's tree, rings hollow at the end of the film. The priest declares that even though Giovanni may originate from wealth, "now he is a peasant son. The most important thing is to love him first and he'll be happy anyways."

The adoption of the child is not a direct response to the rebels in Milan, but acts as its own representation of bearing individual responsibility for the betterment of society. Martin Walsh writes in an excellent article analyzing Olmi's works up to 1971 that the emphasis in the director's films

Is not on events, but on people, and their relationship to their environment: the dual themes of work and nature are recurrent motifs in his examination of man's surrender to commercially orientated society, a surrender which has as its concomitant the loss of the creative instinct. Intellectually, Olmi is in strong contrast to his neorealist predecessors. Not only is there a total lack of didactic political commitment, but his social commentary [...] focuses not on the evils of an unwieldy, stifling bureaucratic machinery, but upon the responsibility of each individual for his own life (Martin Walsh, 1978, p.25)

Although I disagree with the statement about Olmi's intellectual difference with the canonical Neo-Realists, Olmi's films certainly do focus on the choices of the individual in the

face of their own existence. However, the choices made by Olmi's characters also reflect a responsibility they sense in aiding those around them when they know of injustice or of another's heavy burden. The choice of Maddalena and Stefano to adopt the child reflects a motivation to perform a political act within the sphere of his/her own influence. Other similar actions appear throughout the director's works, most notably in Olmi's contribution to *Tickets* (2005), *Singing Behind Screens* (2003), and *The Circumstance*. But at the end of *Tree of Wooden Clogs* Olmi questions the agency of the viewer (and not the Batisti family who is incapable of significantly altering its difficult circumstances), in bearing responsibility for our choices when witnessing oppression and unjust conditions.

Finard, Carnival, and the Parable of the Talents

Out of the four stories in the film, the Finard family's probably occupies the least amount of screen time but consists of a consequential event that appertains to the biblical Parable of the Talents³ and to our own reactions to the rectifiable misfortunes of the peasant families. Through an allusion to the carnival featured in the scene, the film also evokes the politically subversive potential of the cinema. The parable is adapted into Finard's story, reflecting on how his greed and selfishness prevent him from utilizing his anger and unhappiness, which stem from his family's destitute state, productively. As we watch the story unfold, Olmi's

The conflicts within the Finard family do not appear until about twenty-five minutes into

³ In Matthew and Luke, Christ tells the story of a master who gives three of his servants, according to their abilities, stewardship over some money, or talents, while he is away. The first two, who received more talents than the last, doubled the amount they were given while their master was away. The last servant hid his talent in the ground and the master chastises him for wasting his talent.

the film, although we do see the mother, father, and their sons among all the other families beforehand. One day in the courtyard the father's temper flares up when he accuses one of his children of being lazy. Finard picks up a log and hurls it at his son, chasing him outside of the walls of the *cascina*. One of his little girls yells up to turn her mother's attention to the altercation. The wife responds, "They fight like cats and dogs. Every day it is the same thing". But the problem does not seem to be the fault of the boys. In comparison with the rest of the farmers, Finard exhibits much more exasperation with his life than the rest of his co-workers and we can sense a general feeling of unhappiness from him.

Olmi uses the town festival as a framing device to place both Finard's outrage and the historic struggle between classes in perspective. The festival celebrates a miracle that occurred after the historic rebellious action of local citizens against French soldiers 350 years previously. Don Carlo opens the festivities by recounting the events from his pulpit at the church. Because three villagers threw stones at soldiers, General Lutrec of the French forces had decided to burn down the village. The townspeople headed to the church to plead for supplication from the Madonna, that She might intervene on their behalf. A mural of the Madonna and Child in the church was said to have wept. When the General arrived at the church, the painting astonished him and he knelt in front of it, laying his sword and helmet down. The priest's summation of these events upholds his impractical stance on social change. Instead of highlighting the injustice that incited the peasants, he points to the remnants of this incident on an altar, stating that the armor and weapon remain there to this day to remind them of the dangers of the world.

We are presented here with a kind of folk activism that has its roots in the inverted world of carnival, a spectacle akin to the cinema insofar as we are able to use it to explore and experience ideas that can challenge ideological normalities. Although the miracle eventually

contains the subversiveness of the rebellion, the citizens who rise against invaders do not receive punishment in the story the priest tells. Mikhail Bahktin's book, Rabelais and His World, highlights the subversive elements of European popular culture that have roots in the festival of the film.

A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody – all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor. (Mikhail Bahktin, p.4)

The festival takes place at the dawn of the twentieth century but still carries forward the anarchic spirit that characterized the literature of Rabelais and the carnival festival of the author's era. The children ride on a carousel, puppeteers, comic mimes and musicians perform shows, ritualistic contests take place, games are played, and the adult peasants get smashingly drunk. The multi-day festival allows attendees to contort order and challenge, within a certain parameter, the roles society has designated to them.

During the evening of the festival after watching a dancing mime, Finard wanders into a crowd surrounding a political speaker on a raised platform. We see and hear him at first distantly framed in a long shot, reflecting Finard's separation from the speaker.

Unfortunately, social order always lags behind the needs of life. Only with a common possession of knowledge and progress can we finally speak of the new conquests of civilization. When justice and respect for every citizen's rights becomes an everyday occurrence, a rule of life accepted and practiced by everyone, when there are no longer a privileged few while there are others who lack, only then can we say

we've built a democratic society. Unfortunately, social progress moves forward slowly, blocked by those with fear, but above all those who call for it as a human right have not supported it with enough courage. Many remain in the background while only a few bravely move forward.

Initially, Finard draws himself closer to the rabble-rouser and listens attentively, the camera cutting between close-ups of him and the politician framed in a medium shot. The speech does not seem to elicit any collective feeling from the large crowd that has gathered. However, those present cannot be said to be entirely indifferent, because their gazes remain fixed on the speaker; that is, except for Finard who spots a piece of money in the dirt.

When he sees the coin, his face takes on an aspect of wonder that everyone surrounding him has failed to notice the money. The camera cross-cuts between the speaker and Finard watching the ground. Convinced that he is not watched, Finard slyly walks over and places a foot on the coin while pretending to give heed to the speech. Keeping his eyes locked on the speaker, he slowly bends down, removes his foot and places the coin in his hand. Having ascertained that it is indeed what he thought it was, he cannot contain a gleeful laugh as he walks away from the crowd.

Once out of sight, though not out of hearing distance of the speaker's appeal, he pulls up his cloak and races home. At the *cascina* he attempts to sneak by a dog but when it barks he retreats into the stall of his horse. He calms the animal down, picks up its hoof, and after removing dirt and straw, places the coin in the hole he has dug and packs his treasure with dirt, following the lead of the third servant of the parable of the talents. Watching these events depicted in Olmi's style, we become aware of our displeasure with Finard's actions and for ignoring the politician. But simultaneously we perceive our own gaze on the film's events and monitor our own desires to address oppression within our own realities.

The name of Alberto Moravia's article "Ora basta, disse il cavallo" (Enough now, says the horse) derives from the sequence when Finard checks to reassure himself that his money has stayed hidden and he discovers that it has vanished. Panicked, he digs through the horse's foot. He yells, swears, and spits at the animal while he hits it, accusing it of stealing from him. The horse reacts by chasing its master until he is pulled away from his target.

Moravia complains that the horse revolts against Finard's abuse of him while the farmers remain passive because of their humility. The author's shocking misapprehension of the film led to his belief that Olmi was promoting a regressively apathetic worldview. The scathing review was probably one of the most influential factors in Olmi being characterized as 'a-political' filmmaker, which I hope I have demonstrated is decidedly inaccurate.

Conclusion

Disregarding the emphasis on our own reactions encouraged through the film's style in favor of their readings of events depicted, Moravia and other critics of the film recklessly overlooked the political connotations of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. Olmi's direction deliberately attempts to make us more aware of reality and our own political and social obligations. By emphasizing our roles as spectators, the film insists that we make a careful inventory of the realities that appear before us daily, vividly fleshing out our encompassing worlds. Olmi places us in the position of the families at the film's conclusion to question our true political commitments, asking if we will simply voice our regret over oppression or if we will pursue meaningful and lasting change to come to the aid of those requiring assistance.

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