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A Cinematic Premonition of Disorder: Social and Political Satire in Bellocchio's *La Cina è vicina* (1967)

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"We, too, will show you life that's real—very! / But life transformed by the theater into a spectacle most extraordinary!"

Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Mystery Bouffé*

1968 stands out as perhaps the most critical moment of profound social and political upheaval in Italy following the end of WWII and Reconstruction. The tumultuous events that unfolded may be seen as a collective expression of dismay that the rubble of the 20th century's most crucial conflict failed to beget the unified, healthy Italy that had dominated the Italian imagination from the age of the Risorgimento. Although the nation experienced unprecedented economic prosperity following the war, there was considerable disenchantment with a political system that was increasingly characterized by sterile struggles between political parties tainted by corruption. In his 1967 film, *La Cina è vicina*, Marco Bellocchio represents this widespread disillusionment by skewering the shifting sands of Italian *trasformismo* that dominated 20th century political culture. To do so, he borrowed from a theatrical patrimony that includes the likes of Machiavelli, Pirandello, and Brecht; a tradition that equipped Bellocchio with the satirical tools to criticize Italian political culture as a whole, as well as to expose the debilitating symptoms of a society in dire need of rehabilitation. Since the subject of this nuanced satire is a specific historical period, it is necessary to analyze the film based from a perspective that is grounded in the social and political atmosphere of the era. Only from this standpoint can we truly appreciate how those strategies taken from the farcical theater tradition could be employed to effectively reveal the actual core problems intrinsic to the state of Italy in the moments leading up to the outbreak of popular dissent that would mark 1968 and its aftermath.

In order to address the state of Italian society and politics during the period, Bellocchio focused his lens on the interweaving relationships of two couples from Northern Italy's provinces, an area the he had already dealt with in his highly regarded 1965 film, *I pugni in tasca*. He depicted Italy's landed bourgeois class through Vittorio, a local school teacher, and his sister Elena, who both reside in an opulent provincial manor with their younger brother, Camillo. Bellocchio forsakes a traditional portraiture of the Italian family by placing Elena in the role of the de facto pater familias, responsible for supervising the family's estate. Changes in gender roles and the "sexual revolution," however, do not undermine the devastating power of greed and corruption (as we shall see, the double standards and immaturity of Italian men "of the left" are also comically exposed in the film). On the other side of the social spectrum are Carlo and Giovanna, both characters with working class roots. We meet them during the film's opening sequence, locked in an amorous embrace in a room inside the dim socialist party headquarters. Their initial conversation reveals the desire for wealth and the theme of corruption that will drive the entire plot:

Giovanna: *E allora perché non ci sposiamo?*

Carlo: *Due persone che si amano sono già sposate.*

Giovanna: *Adesso poi che diventerai assessore....*

Carlo: *Già, divento ricco. Lo sai che un assessore guadagna 68.000 lire al mese?*

Giovanna: *I soldi sono una scusa.*

Carlo: *Sono una realtà.¹*

The following day, when Carlo recognizes that his superiors in the socialist party have opted to recruit the wealthier Vittorio instead of him for the elected position of alderman, he realizes that his only recourse is to devise a new strategy to obtain the riches that designation would have allotted him. When he is taken on as Vittorio's assistant, Carlo sets his sights on Elena, who succumbs to his advances and soon finds herself pregnant with his child. As soon as Giovanna realizes that Carlo is angling for the richer Elena, she in turn gives in to Vittorio's own sexual entreaties, resulting (somewhat directly and with sharp comic effect) in her own pregnancy. The film concludes with the two pregnant women doing exercises they have gleaned from the pages of *Sarò Madre*, ironically pointing to the successful insertion of both Carlo and Giovanna into the bourgeois milieu of Vittorio and Elena.

An important sub-plot in the film concerns the youngest brother Camillo's repeated attempts at fomenting a Maoist-style revolution against the dominant political class. He is first caught painting the phrase "La Cina è vicina" on the walls of the socialist party headquarters where he later plants an innocuous bomb that detonates dramatically, yet without any casualties or real damage. As will be discussed in greater detail below, Bellocchio utilizes Camillo and his fellow young-Maoists to mock the rhetoric of extreme leftism and its spirit of revolution that was simmering in Italy's left-wing circles throughout the post-war period. Through a comic depiction of the young Camillo and his friends, Bellocchio lampoons those extremist groups that would tragically visit Italy with bloodshed during the so-called *anni di piombo* of the late sixties and seventies².

The tragicomic mode that Bellocchio utilizes in *La Cina è vicina* enables him to set a stage upon which to synthesize farcical comedic theatricality with dour tragedy. It is no surprise that tragicomedy was a popular mode, even a genre in and of itself in Italy during the 1960s, with Germi's *Divorzio all'italiana* (1962) and *Sedotta e abbandonata* (1964), and Lattuada's *Mafioso* (1962) as perhaps the most renowned films. In a way, such films are darker versions of the widely popular, satirical *commedia all'italiana* that flourished in Italy during the 50s and 60s³. A key characteristic that separates these tragicomedies from *commedia all'italiana* is that while typical Italian comedies from this period tend to paint the lower-class in a positive light, the tragicomedies I have mentioned above condemn virtually all of the characters as morally bankrupt, regardless of class. In the case of *La Cina è vicina*, Bellocchio comprehensively denounces each character regardless of social class or political affiliation, circumventing any facile illustrations of "good" versus "evil." This universal condemnation is in line with the tradition of Italian satirical playwrights, particularly Pirandello and Machiavelli, and points to a long tradition of unmasking the illusory constructions that dominate human reality through the tragicomic mode⁴.

La Cina è vicina represents only one chapter in Bellocchio's unmasking of established myths and objective societal truths, as evidenced by some of the predominant themes of the two pictures that chronologically bookend this film: *I pugni in tasca*, 1965, and *Discutiamo, discutiamo*, Bellocchio's contribution to *Amore e rabbia*, 1969. In *I pugni in tasca*, Bellocchio masterfully criticizes the moral void in Italian society by depicting a dysfunctional provincial family in the final throes of a

protracted state of decay. Through the character of Ale, who murders his mother and brother before being struck down by his own illness, Bellocchio symbolically reproaches not only violence of the family, but also that of a nation without moral guidance (significantly, this family has no father) whose social institutions are corrupt and obsolete. In *Discutiamo, discutiamo*, he parodies both communist rhetoric and the ultra left-wing, staging the invasion of a university lecture by a group of students that ridicules the intransigence of communist ideology.

This short film discloses Bellocchio's refusal to ally himself with any particular ideological stance, particularly not to those postures promoted by the mainstream socialist (PSI) and communist (PC) parties. He depicts the invading students as pigheaded radicals beholden to a myopic perspective of communism that stems from an unquestioning reading of Marx. What makes this politically charged sequence most effective, however, is the unmistakable "theatricality" of Bellocchio's short. Unfolding entirely within the confines of a university lecture hall, Bellocchio clearly demarcates the lines of opposition by having both attending students and professors seated while the protesters stand. Once we notice how the professors (one played by Bellocchio himself) wear costume beards that are so obviously fake, and that the actors are barely able to recite their lines through self-conscious laughter, this clear-cut delineation between two opposing sides, and actors and fictional characters, becomes less transparent. With poor acting and the introduction of stage props (the professor beards; the plastic clubs wielded by the police at the end) Bellocchio highlights the role of the actor as a theatrical performer, rejecting any claims to realism and availing himself of a dramatic strategy that appears similar to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte*. Like Pirandello's own ideas about the artist's responsibility to unmask illusion, Brecht theorized that the artist could create an alienating effect by making his own artifice clear to the audience. By introducing actors whose beards are obviously false and who laugh at their own theatricality, Bellocchio stresses the need to look beneath the surface of the rhetoric that the actors spout and of political rhetoric in Italy at the time. For Brecht, the audience had to be taken out of its realm of comfort so as to become active; a method that, he thought, would inspire the audience members to think critically about what they were viewing and about the structures of society and politics in ways that simple realism could not.

While it would likely prove inaccurate to state that Bellocchio's film was intended to spur his audience into action, a look at the specific

nature of the historical crisis in which *La Cina è vicina* was situated aids in comprehending how comic theatricality increased the poignancy of this scathing social criticism. Lumley opens part one of his *States of Emergency* by defining 68 in Italy in terms of Gramsci's "organic crisis." "In 1968-9 Italy experienced an 'organic crisis', in which there was a massive withdrawal of support for the structures of representation, and an abrupt increase in political demands" (Lumley, 9). Forgacs defines Gramsci's "organic crisis" as

A crisis of the whole system, in which contradictions in the economic structure have repercussions through the super-structures. One of its signs is when the traditional forms of political representation (parties or party leaders) are no longer recognized as adequate by the economic class or class fraction which they had previously served to represent. It is therefore a crisis of hegemony, since it occurs when a formerly hegemonic class is challenged from below and is no longer able to hold together a cohesive bloc of social alliances. (Gramsci, 427)

This crisis of hegemony and the dwindling faith in representative democracy are most poignantly portrayed in the figure of Vittorio. We are introduced to Vittorio seated upon the toilet saying, "Dio mio, dio mio, perché mi hai abbandonato?" in reference to a spell of constipation; an introduction, Bondanella notes, that marks Vittorio as the consummate *inetto*. While one would assume that Vittorio, *figlio maggiore*, would be a surrogate *pater familias*, we soon learn that his position within this bourgeois family is anything but dominant. The traditionally male position as head of the household is, as we have seen, placed firmly in the hands of Elena, who controls the family estate and dismisses any criticism that he may direct at her. When he chides her for languishing in bed with her lover late into the morning, his weak position is unmistakable:

Vittorio: *Non potevate andare in albergo?!... Camillo potrebbe ricevere uno choc...*

Elena: *E perché spendere per un albergo, se abbiamo una casa e nessuno ce lo proibisce?*

Vittorio: *Tè lo proibisco io!*

Elena: *Tu non conti...*

Vittorio's opportunity to gain back some respect comes in the form of the offer of political appointment as a Socialist Party candidate for the position of local alderman. In allying Vittorio with the diminished Socialist Party, which like the figure of the *inetto*, was out of touch with the changing political climate, Bellocchio underlines the lack of stable political options within the Italian party system. "The inability of the PCI, and of the PSI (which was ceasing to be a mass party), to recruit, represent and mobilize workers, and particularly immigrant workers, youth and women, signaled a failure to deal with the major social transformations of postwar Italy" (Lumley, 28). Lumley points to the Socialists as epitomizing *trasformismo*, the idea that one party's political stance becomes mixed with that of the opposition: "For its part, the Socialist Party lost its electoral primacy on the left in 1948, and, following a long period of subalternity to the PCI, it was sucked into the DC system of power in the mid-1960s. Thus it lacked autonomy and was poorly placed to respond adequately to the pressures and demands arising in society" (Gundle, 5)⁵.

In *La Cina è vicina*, Bellocchio expresses the widely felt disillusionment with Center-Left coalitions among Italian intellectuals during the 1960s. The so-called "New Left" was comprised of intellectuals who, like Bellocchio, were frustrated with the fruitless status-quo that predominated in the traditional parties. In the pages of a number of influential journals like *Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, *Nuovo Impegno*, and *Quaderni Piacentini* (which will be discussed in greater detail below), a vibrant means for social and political criticism flourished (Lumley, 35). This discouraging stance towards the party system is explained by Vittorio while having dinner with his two aunts. In his attempt to convince the pious pair to betray their conservative loyalties, accept the need for "change," and vote for him, Vittorio's speech ironically resonates with the negative outlook on the Italian political system, echoing the legendary Lampedusan maxim: "*Io e non il partito, non l'idea, perché non ci sono più partiti, non ci sono più idee; perché le cose resteranno esattamente come sono.*"

During the sequence of Vittorio's first foray into public speaking, Bellocchio stresses a widespread disdain for politicians that extended far beyond the limits of intellectual circles. In this carefully choreographed scene, Bellocchio's camera makes the divide between the nervous bourgeois politician and the working class painfully evident. Prior to their arrival in the town square where Vittorio is set to speak, Vittorio is placed in the passenger seat with Carlo driving where the

position of the camera underlines his subjective gaze. The camera cuts to a shot of Carlo from Vittorio's perspective in the passenger seat. This is followed by a cut to the oncoming road, presumably also from Vittorio's viewpoint. After the next cut, the shot is from the rear interior of the car capturing Vittorio facing in the direction of Carlo and saying, "*Naturalmente spero che ci sarà uno spiegamento di forze; non vorrei che chiunque impuamente potesse tirarmi un sasso.*" Here, Bellocchio breaks with cinematic convention, jettisoning the standard shot-counter-shot technique. Instead, the camera lingers on Vittorio while Carlo's voice interjects from the off-screen space. The establishing shot that follows shows the car crawl along the deserted town road and approach a local bar. Again, the camera is fixed from Vittorio's perspective, first showing his beleaguered expression, then a long shot of the empty square that he beholds, all followed by an unusual medium shot from the rear of the car that captures Vittorio's back, Carlo exiting and walking in front of the car, and two locals standing in the deepest sector of the frame.

This formal approach serves to center Vittorio, who is alienated from both the provincial landscape and its people. Sadly, the empty country square he approaches is far from the pomp and circumstance that he had envisioned would accompany his inaugural public address. Aghast, he remarks, "*Non c'è nessuno... dov'è il palco?... e i carabinieri?*" After a brief but intense argument in the car in which Vittorio's disappointment turns to out-right indignation, Bellocchio combines a number of long takes with the crescendo of off-screen sound, keeping Vittorio in his car to nervously repel the sales pitch of an eager street-vendor while Carlo nonchalantly sets up the microphone and mixes with the gathering crowd. Like in *I pugni in tasca*, where the festering antagonism between family members is exacerbated by the grating clink of silverware at the dinner table, here, Bellocchio employs the intensification of ambient diegetic sound with brilliant effect. The methodical camera-work, alternating between Vittorio cowering in his car and the accumulation of bystanders in the square, along with the intensifying noise of the assemblage, masterfully builds dramatic tension for the speech to come.

When he finally exits the car and faces a crowd mostly composed of schoolboys on bicycles, the street-vendor and his soap, a few listless farmers, and an elderly man with a toothless grin, Vittorio makes the tragic mistake of slapping one youth who tries to make off with a page

from his speech. This enrages the throng whose subsequent attack forces him to seek refuge in the safety of a nearby bar where he, Carlo, and Elena watch helplessly as the mob metes punishment out on Vittorio's car—the status-symbol of the moneyed bourgeoisie. The entire sequence serves to highlight Vittorio's—and the party's own—unsuitability to represent local concerns. The act of physical revolt against a system that is unfit to govern and represent the will of the populace will reappear at the film's conclusion, although in the form of an adolescent prank by the young Maoists.

After their arrival in the town square and a focus on Vittorio's escalating disquietude, the camera shifts focus and pays considerable attention to Carlo, who takes center stage. His composed interaction with the townsfolk solidifies his working class identity; roots in the community that would presumably make him a more effective socialist figurehead as a “man-of-the-people.” That he was once slated for the alderman position before Vittorio was selected, however, further shows Bellocchio's contempt for party politics and the entrenched, well-paid bureaucracies they engendered. But Carlo, like every main character in *La Cina è vicina*, is negatively marked, and Bellocchio concentrates a Machiavellian ideal of dissemblance in this young figure in order to counteract the naïve buffoonery of Vittorio and his ridiculous political aspirations. First and foremost, Carlo does not seek elected office out of any faithful adherence to socialist ideology, but rather to obtain the position of alderman for the higher salary of this “lavoro fisso.” Once Vittorio is offered the position desired by Carlo, his dreams of financial advancement through the party disintegrate, and Carlo is driven instead to acquire wealth by surreptitiously impregnating Elena and forcing her to take him as a husband. In aiding Vittorio's election, Carlo is a grotesque caricature of Machiavelli's *Prince*, who is quick to take advantage of the turning tides of fortune and manipulate what would seem to be a disadvantage (losing out on the alderman position) to his benefit (marrying a rich provincial landowner).

Similarly, Giovanna, who is perhaps the least developed of the principal characters, must react to Carlo's new course of action. When she realizes his plot to capture the hand of Elena, she finds herself abandoned and compromised, only to rebound into the arms of the awaiting Vittorio. Ceding to Vittorio's awkward advances is not enough, however, for her to solidify a favorable position, and as we notice, Vittorio seems initially to suggest that their lovemaking is no more than a passing tryst

(he says, “*Mi raccomando, riservatezza assoluta. Scusa, sai, ma mi pare sia stato deciso di comune accordo. Libera tu, libero io*”). Where she demonstrates true guile is in agreeing to spy on Elena for Carlo in return for him conceiving a child with her, allowing her to then blackmail Vittorio into marriage. She callously lays out the plan to Carlo: “*Se tu vuoi farti sposare da Elena perché aspetta un figlio, anch’io voglio farmi sposare da Vittorio. Per questo tu devi fare in modo che io abbia un figlio.*” In this light, Giovanna is reminiscent of another Machiavellian personage, Lucrezia from the play *La mandragola*. At the end of the play, Lucrezia realizes that her affair with Callimaco is to both her and her family’s advantage, so she decides to play along, satisfying everyone and establishing herself as the cleverest character of the entire play. Likewise, Giovanna’s sudden move to Vittorio’s side underlines her own cleverness in hatching a plot—a strategy that will, in fact, put her on firmer financial ground than had Carlo stayed with her.

Given the inequalities faced by married women in Italy during the 1950s and 60s, one wonders if Giovanna’s ploy to “marry up” is such a wise idea. We can, in fact, forgive Elena for her cold suspicion of men seeking her hand in marriage and understand why she would have wanted to avoid a legal union with Carlo at all costs. In looking at women’s rights during the period in question, one finds her suspicion is well-founded⁶. Bellocchio is keen to position Elena as the de facto head of the household from the beginning of the film since in the game of betrothal, she stands to lose the most of anyone. Vittorio explains this situation during a conversation with Carlo:

Vittorio: ...*Quella è mia sorella... Lei bada al patrimonio...
abbiamo tre poteri da queste parti*

Carlo: ...*È bella ...*

Vittorio: *Sì, ma resterà nubile: ha troppa paura che la sposino
per i soldi...*

Once she realizes Carlo’s plot, Elena is quick to ask Vittorio to help her obtain an abortion. This, too, was a very tangible reality for Italian women at the time, who having no legal recourse to receive an abortion in Italy, were forced to either go abroad where the practice was legal or risk an illegal local procedure. “According to the most impartial of sources, the Ministry of Health, 850,000 Italian women each year faced the humiliation and the physical risks of ‘back street’ abortion.

UNESCO provided a more dramatic figure of over a million abortions per year" (Signorelli, 60). The scene in the doctor's office, when Carlo surges through the door with a priest en tow, also serves to criticize the church, whose powerful influence strongly hindered the passing of family planning legislation. When they are caught red-handed by Carlo and the priest trying to conduct an illegal abortion, both the doctor and the anesthetist respond with mock piety:

Doctor: *La sua apparizione padre, è stata la mia Damasco.*

Don Pino: *Di questo ringraziamo il Signore...*

Doctor: *...Reverendo, vorrei confessarmi.*

Anesthetist: *Anch'io, reverendo padre... di tutto.*

Carlo (to the nurse): *E lei non si confessa?*

Nurse: *Io non ho niente da perdere...*

Doctor: *Il suo perdono padre, mi ha folgorato... tanto che vorrei tangibilmente dimostrarle la mia eterna riconoscenza con una offerta per la sua parrocchia...*

The young Maoist Camillo plays an interesting role in the drama that unfolds in the office of the abortionist that underlines Bellocchio's criticism of the contradictions and naiveté evident in left-wing extremism in Italy. He is shocked and indignant to find out that his sister is pregnant:

Camillo: *E chi è il padre?*

Carlo: *Non lo so, ma a questo punto importa anche poco.*

Camillo: *E io che in cuor mio non trovo ragione perché non fosse vergine.*

Carlo plays on Camillo's underlying Catholic beliefs that abortion is wrong and that, ideally, a woman must remain chaste until she is married. When Camillo sees Elena, he remarks, "*Perché non dovrei impedire a mia sorella di rovinarsi del tutto?! Perché tu ti rovini, ti rovini!!!*" But as we have seen at the beginning of the film, these beliefs are far from ironclad in Camillo's inchoate system of reasoning. Although he is shown as both an altar boy and assistant to the local priest, Bellocchio does not only criticize Camillo's Catholicism, but also points a disapproving finger at the contradictions of his leftist, Maoist ideology. From the film's opening, Camillo reads curious passages concerning Mao's

“Little Red Book” that are rather unexpected from a fledgling revolutionary. When we first encounter him, he is placed at the head of a table, offering a prepared speech for his two friends on the subject of “il problema sessuale:”

Camillo: Intendo per rapporto sessuale un rapporto coitale non interruptus, in posizione orizzontale, nella totale distensione del corpo secondo la sua lunghezza, con la partecipazione attiva e consapevole di ambedue i contraenti.

In his speech, he concocts a plan for a type of sexual training in which he and his friends will be able to “experiment” on a local peasant girl, who is a safe object for their exercise, unlike a prostitute with whom, “*rischieremmo di contrarre delle infezioni veneree che potrebbero indebolire con le loro conseguenze le nostre già esigue file.*” The contradictions inherent in the exploitation of this Giuliana, who has, “*disponibilità amatorie, a suo dire, inesauribili,*” are immediately evident, since what Camillo defines sex as an act, “*la partecipazione attiva e consapevole di ambedue i contraenti,*” is the opposite of what he intends to perform with Giuliana, who, “*sarebbe colta, durante l’amplesso, da una specie di invereconda estasi o ipnosi, così totale che il suo partner potrebbe venire sostituito senza che lei nemmeno se ne accorga.*”

He and his friends meet with Giuliana in the basement of Camillo’s house, and when it is his turn to lay with her, Camillo offers a soliloquy that underlines the confused reasoning he applies to the act that he is about to perform:

Camillo: L’azione che mi accingo a compiere non è un abuso... ora, potrebbe anche sembrarle una comune e squallida violenza a una minorenne incosciente... ma del vantaggio che io riceverò beneficerà in definitiva anche lei... la giusta causa che con questa buona disposizione sta favorendo, favorirà, nel tempo, anche la classe a cui ella appartiene, aiutandola a prendere coscienza del proprio sfruttamento attraverso di me, che l’aiuterò a prendere coscienza; io, che potrò farlo, anche perché lei in questo modo mi sta aiutando a prendere coscienza...

Beyond the sexual exploitation of the innocent Giuliana, Bellocchio figures the young Maoist’s forays into terrorism as absurd and ineffectual. Camillo is first caught red-handed defacing the socialist party

headquarters, then he and his friends plant an innocuous bomb in the bathroom, that when it explodes, creates billows of smoke, but little damage. The film concludes with a comic ploy by the Maoists to obstruct Vittorio's speech. One of Camillo's companions throws a cat on Vittorio's back while the others release a pair of German Shepherds to attack him. This band of young Maoists are more misfits than ideologues, and they seem to use Maoist sayings ("*Non dimentichiamoci infatti che, come dice il presidente Mao, la classe Contadina è la sola classe rivoluzionaria*") in their most general sense, without any consideration of what meaning might lie behind them.

In an interview with Peter Brunette, Bellocchio discussed his views of leftist extremism. When asked to discuss social criticism in the 1980s, Bellocchio replies,

It can't be frontal any longer, but requires the discovery of the reasons that the earlier types of revolution failed. For example, in Italy the terrorists, like the Maoists, were applying certain theories which were partly positive, but which didn't take social and psychological reality into account. Consequently, it became a religion, something that came from the outside, in a certain sense, thinking very simplistically for example that things would change if the economic relations changed. That's why capitalism won so easily. (Brunette, 55)

The Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao in 1966, had received considerable attention in the aforementioned intellectual journals in Italy, particularly in *Quaderni Piacentini*, a publication founded by Bellocchio's brother, Pier Giorgio Bellocchio, in 1962.⁷ The influence of this journal on the director has been duly noted: "Si sa per certo, dalle biografie, che Bellocchio è intricato ai bordi di una esperienza politica minoritaria, si suppone che certi suoi atteggiamenti nascano nell'ambito di una rivista accanita come *Quaderni Piacentini*" (Bellocchio, 13). In the journal, a number of articles appeared that dealt with China, Maoism, and the Cultural Revolution in the years leading up to the release of *La Cina è vicina*, and one in particular, written in April of 1967 by Edoardo Masi entitled, "Note sulla rivoluzione culturale cinese" demonstrates one example of Italian intellectual interest in the events in China (Masi, 153).

Above all, this article highlights the highly complex perceptions of the Cultural Revolution in Italy at the time. Masi discusses Mao's inability to find some resolution between ideology and political exigency, "Fuso e confuso con le questioni di metodo, più esplicito nel movimento attuale è l'aspetto ideologico. Appunto le dichiarazioni di principio, l'impostazione dei problemi e gli indirizzi e le proposte di soluzione hanno suscitato fra noi più interesse, consensi e discussioni" (Masi, 159). As is apparent from the article's title, Masi makes no attempt to apply any value judgment on the Cultural Revolution, instead discussing Mao's revolution in terms of other communist uprisings in history. In conclusion to his article, Masi questions the revolution's project of destruction in the interest of progress: "La grave difficoltà di questa condizione è che la Cina è anche un grande stato, dove bisogna produrre e costruire: l'enfasi sul momento distruttivo è inevitabilmente in contraddizione con l'esigenza di costruire e—entro certi limiti—di conservare" (Masi, 162).

As laid out above, *La Cina è vicina* offers a unique insight into a number of social and political issues of the period. By representing the simmering discontent that was no doubt widespread, Bellocchio anticipated the unrest that would take place in 1968. Curiously, this film was not well-received when it was released in 1967, and was criticized as a step backwards for Bellocchio, whose critically acclaimed *I pugni in tasca* had anointed him as an *enfant terrible* of Italian cinema. In retrospect, the director himself noted the prophetic place this film now seems to take:

Il Movimento Studentesco ha sempre fatto più riferimento a *I pugni in tasca*. *La Cina è vicina* è stato considerato quasi una farsa contro i partiti tradizionali. In questo senso, io sbagliavo profondamente a sottovalutarlo. Recentemente, l'ho rivisto e devo dire che, seppur con un linguaggio piuttosto semplice, ha una virulenza e dice delle cose che sono di fortissima attualità. Io l'ho visto in un cinema, durante una rassegna: i giovani ridevano, si divertivano, erano coinvolti, proprio perché vedevano questo balletto, questa ridicolizzazione dei partiti tradizionali. Come, in realtà, è accaduto! Questo trasformismo sfacciato di questi ultimi anni: tutte cose che, effettivamente, allora erano descritte e che si sono avverate dopo. (Cruciani, 1)

The film's position directly preceding the events of 1968 give its social critique an added poignancy, demonstrating how attuned Bellocchio was to the ripening situation.

Given the eruption of social unrest that began in 1968 and the bloody left-wing terrorism of the 1970s, this film serves as an ominous reminder of the stages that led up to this period of disorder. Like in *I pugni in tasca*, the microcosm of Italian society that Bellocchio constructs in *La Cina è vicina* outlines how the predominant cultural, ethical, and political questions of the period were rife with contradiction. The film confronts a number of widely debated social issues of the day, including abortion, women's rights, and the role of the church, while also representing a political class that was sorely out of touch with contemporary reality and a youth culture that was increasingly being seduced by leftist extremism. By means of its tragicomic form, this satire of a tumultuous age points to a society ripe for a cultural revolution, demonstrating Bellocchio's impressive capacity to explore the interstices of real social and political problems. In doing so, *La Cina è vicina* represents a prophetic warning of popular unrest that would explode into public consciousness in the form of the mass uprisings of 1968.

Notes

1. All dialogue from *La Cina è vicina* is taken from the published screenplay. See: Bellocchio, Marco. *La Cina è vicina*. Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1967.

2. One such group, the infamous *Brigate Rosse*, are the subject of Bellocchio's excellent 2003 film, *Buongiorno, notte*.

3. In discussing the *commedia all'italiana*, Bondanella remarks that, "It is a film genre which continues, in some important respects, the older *commedia dell'arte* theatrical tradition and might be more accurately described as tragicomedy bordering on the grotesque. Flourishing at the height of what has been termed the "Italian economic miracle," the *commedia all'italiana* lays bare an undercurrent of social malaise and the painful contradictions of a culture in rapid transformation." (Bondanella, 145)

4. In discussing the importance of tragicomedy in Pirandello's theory of *umorismo*, Illiano notes: "La vita, dice l'agrigentino, è una tragicomica buffonata in cui gli uomini sono costretti dal destino a ingannarsi a vicenda, a mascherarsi dietro scopi illusori e forme fittizie quali l'onestà, la prudenza, l'amicizia, la costanza, l'amore, la libertà, ecc." (Illiano, 135)

5. Vittorio's speech before he is attacked by German Shepherds comically illuminates his "flexible" political allegiances: *Senza avere mai svolto una vera e propria attività politica, ho simpatizzato per la D.C., P.S.D.I., P.C.I., P.R.I. e P.S.I... questa disinvolta disponibilità politica, comune del resto a tanti altri italiani, non è evidentemente un indice di leggerezza morale, ma la migliore garanzia che il centro-sinistra non è soltanto una coalizione politica di emergenza ma una alleanza che era già in cammino molto tempo fa e doveva inesorabilmente realizzarsi, cioè che questi quattro partiti che la costituiscono, anche quando esprimevano una linea politica contrastante, di fatto erano già destinati a convergere tra loro...*

6. Signorelli discusses the unfortunate place in the eyes of the law held by married women of this period:

"In the area of family law, the contradictions and limitations were absurd and often shocking. A woman had to take her husband's surname. The husband had the right to establish where the couple should take up residence and even to inspect his wife's correspondence. Furthermore, he still enjoyed the *ius corrigenda*, that is to say, the right to beat his wife with the aim of 'teaching her.' Since he exercised parental authority, he made all decisions that concerned the children. If a wife left the conjugal home without her husband's permission, she committed a crime of 'abbandono del tetto coniugale' and, if she took the children with her, the crime of abduction of minors." (Signorelli, 48)

7. In a recent interview with Mariella Cruciani, Bellocchio discussed the political influence of this journal: "Prima ancora del '68, sono stato fortemente influenzato dal movimento dei Quaderni Piacentini e da una certa sinistra radicale, che era a sinistra del PCI. Il mio ruolo è sempre stato assolutamente secondario: anche i Quaderni Piacentini io li leggevo, mio fratello Piergiorgio vi partecipava, però la mia collaborazione non è quasi mai esistita." See: "Marco Bellocchio: Il cinema che non si arrende," www.kataweb.it, 2/21/08

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