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Keep Your Dreams Alive: *Lazzaro felice*, Authoritarian Liberalism, and the Slow Death of Progress in the Italian Second Republic

Aidan Power

Department of Communications, Drama, and Film, University of Exeter, Exeter

ABSTRACT

This article considers *Lazzaro felice* (Alice Rohrwacher, 2018) as counter-history to the neoliberal takeover of the modern Italian state. Specifically, it argues the film's characters serve as witnesses to an authoritarian liberalist hijacking of democracy, the logical endpoint of which is a return to fascism. This reading will be contextualized against the seemingly perpetual cycle of economic and political crises that beset Italy from the establishment of the Second Republic in 1994 to the election of Giorgia Meloni in 2022, positing that the resurgence of the far right has been facilitated by a deliberate, technocratically executed separation of economic and democratic spheres, a process that *Lazzaro* addresses in both its content and its form. The eponymous Lazzaro, in this reading, emerges as a Benjaminian Angel of History, one who wants to warn us about the impending disaster but keeps getting blown off track by the neoliberal storm we call progress.

SOMMARIO

Questo articolo propone una riflessione su *Lazzaro felice* (Alice Rohrwacher, 2018) interpretandolo come una contro-storia del consolidamento neoliberale dello stato italiano. Nello specifico, sostiene che i personaggi del film agiscono come testimoni diretti di un dirottamento della democrazia ad opera del 'liberalismo autoritario', la cui logica conclusione è un ritorno al fascismo. Tale lettura del film sarà contestualizzata rispetto al ciclo continuo di crisi politiche ed economiche che hanno afflitto l'Italia dalla nascita della Seconda Repubblica nel 1994 fino all'elezione di Giorgia Meloni nel 2022. L'ipotesi è che l'ascesa dell'estrema destra sia stata favorita da una separazione deliberata e tecnocratica tra la sfera economica e quella democratica: un processo che *Lazzaro* affronta sia nel contenuto che nella forma. In tale interpretazione, la figura di Lazzaro emerge come un Angelo della Storia benjaminiano, desideroso di metterci in guardia sull'imminente disastro ma continuamente dismesso dalla tempesta neoliberale che chiamiamo progresso.

KEYWORDS

crisis; authoritarian liberalism; neoliberalism; Italian Second Republic; *Angel of History*

PAROLE CHIAVE

crisi; liberalismo autoritario; neoliberalismo; Seconda Repubblica; *L'angelo della storia*

CONTACT Aidan Power  A.Power3@exeter.ac.uk

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First Time as Tragedy ...

In Italy, I perceive a time where chaos and vulgarity rule. As if every kind of logic has been lost. And I think a story which has the aspect of a fairy-tale might make it possible to say something about the reality [...] My hero remains the same person, while the world around him changes. I would actually go further: even when we consider a world which believes itself to be undergoing change, we can see that it remains fundamentally the same. — Alice Rohrwacher¹

Lazzaro felice, directed by Alice Rohrwacher (2018), emerged at an inflection point in modern Italian history: the moment just before a long-diminished post-war consensus finally gave way to the mainstream re-emergence of fascism. As a founding member of the European Economic Community, the Italian state was a key player in the journey towards European integration, and yet, in an ironic twist, this same journey led to the 2022 election of Giorgia Meloni, whose Fratelli d'Italia party traces its lineage directly back to Benito Mussolini.² Ironic because the establishment of the first Italian Republic in 1948, and the signing of the Treaty of Rome nine years later, were undertaken in large part to ensure that the horrors of fascist mass murder would never again be repeated on European soil. *Lazzaro felice* also emerged in the interregnum between two of the greatest crises to have afflicted the post-war state — the Eurozone crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic — both of which hit Italy especially hard and devastated an Italian working class whose interests have been under intensified attack since the formation of the Italian Second Republic in 1994, around the same time that the film's narrative begins. That Fratelli d'Italia were sworn into power almost 100 years to the day after the March on Rome owes much to the economic fallout from both crises, one shaped by a neoliberal playbook that has governed the parameters of Italian politics for a generation.

The central thesis of this article is that *Lazzaro* provides a counter-history of this period, its characters serving as first-hand witnesses to a neoliberal hijacking of democracy, the logical endpoint of which is a return to authoritarianism. Specifically, I will argue that this turn of events has been sustained by a deliberate hollowing out of democracy, a process expedited by a separation of economic and democratic spheres that *Lazzaro* addresses in both its content and its form. In order to reach this point, I will first finesse and historicize my use of crisis as a concept, before relating this conceptualization specifically to contemporary Italian contexts. The second half of the article will then apply this analysis to *Lazzaro*.

Crises in capitalism are, of course, nothing new. Karl Marx saw crises as being intrinsic to capitalist accumulation in that they served as correctives that restored the system in favour of the bourgeoisie, while simultaneously heralding capitalism's inevitable downfall.³ Crises in Italian capitalism are definitely not new, and nor are the far-right solutions offered unfamiliar; Meloni's resuscitation of the fascist-era slogan '*Dio, patria, famiglia*' being a depressing case in point. Antonio Gramsci, who wrote extensively about crisis in an Italian context, was less convinced than Marx that crises within capitalism would inevitably lead to an overthrow of the existing order. Writing from the bowels of a fascist prison at the dawn of the 1930s, Gramsci observed first-hand the weaponization of crisis at a time when Italy's bourgeoisie facilitated Mussolini's rise in order to ward off the Partito Comunista Italiano and preserve the economic status quo. Gramsci's isolation of the interregnum is well known, formulated in his diagnosis

that ‘the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’.⁴ Mussolini — an especially malignant symptom — had been in power for almost eight years by this point, the rise of the fascists signifying for Gramsci both capitalism in decline and potentially fertile ground for an eventual proletarian uprising. Like Meloni a century later,⁵ Mussolini was disinclined to let a good crisis go to waste and ruthlessly exploited the aftermath of a major international conflict (World War I), a deadly pandemic (the 1918 flu pandemic), and, latterly, a global financial meltdown (the Wall Street Crash of 1929) to cement his grip on power. Dario Gentili, whose work on crisis has been a significant influence on this article, observes that Gramsci was mindful of both the political crisis that led to Mussolini’s ascendancy and the economic crisis triggered by the Wall Street crash, and notes that in Gramsci’s terms, crisis takes the form of a *dispositif*: a ‘complex process, as in many other phenomena, and not a unique “fact” repeated in various forms through a cause having one single origin’.⁶ Crisis, in short, is ‘a process and not an event’, one that ‘does not lead inexorably to an end — salvation or death — for the suspension between life and death can last indefinitely’.⁷ Such is the fate of late capitalist Italy, where crisis as *dispositif* has become the new normal, the economy remaining on life support, the future in suspended animation, and the gap between economic and democratic spheres growing wider by the day.⁸ The role of government accordingly becomes one of crisis management, and some ninety years after Gramsci’s diagnosis, preservation of the economic status quo remains the primary consideration.⁹ The interregnum then, as Gentili notes,

does not simply define a period of transition, but a particular art of government that the capitalist use of the *dispositif* configures, an art of government that acts by postponing the equilibrium resulting from the treatment or alleged treatment of the disease. Diseases continue to appear one after the other.¹⁰

In a twenty-first century where capitalist accumulation reckons with rapidly dwindling planetary resources, an accelerated timeline of future crises becomes inevitable.¹¹

An obvious difficulty for any Italian government seeking to treat these diseases is the restrictions imposed upon it by a much wider neoliberal constellation in the European Union. As I have argued elsewhere, the gap between what the EU might be and what it has become grows wider with each passing year, as market logic trumps all other considerations.¹² The EU’s reversion to the mean that followed in the wake of mass state spending during the Covid pandemic¹³ is but the latest and most literal example of a trend where, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, ‘the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule’.¹⁴ While it may be expedient to isolate the fallout from the Eurozone crisis as the origin of Italy’s current travails, in reality, therefore, the country’s contemporary cycle of crises extends back much further, to at least the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and, more locally, the collapse of the first Republic in 1994, an event that signalled the death knell of a durable, if often uneasy, post-fascist consensus. Italy’s economic decay in the years since is summarized thusly by the economists Annamaria Simonazzi and Teresa Barbieri:

Since the mid-1990s Italy has gone through a prolonged period of stagnation. It has recorded one of the lowest rates of growth in the European Union (EU) and has not undergone the

booms and busts experienced by the other peripheral Eurozone countries. Moreover, its historically high debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio has entailed long-standing fiscal austerity. The transition from rapid growth to quasi-stagnation, coupled with a tighter public balance constraint, formed the basis for middle-class discontent, dwindling political support and reform fatigue, opening the way to two colliding trends: a populist drive in the political arena and a neoliberal strategy in the economic policy field.¹⁵

This time period is more or less concurrent with the enactment of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, an agreement that institutionalized neoliberalism across the newly emergent EU. Two years prior, Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti — in his final stint in the role — had been an enthusiastic promoter of the Treaty, which superseded the Treaty of Rome, deepened European economic integration, and established the basis for the modern-day EU. Andreotti accepted neoliberal reforms as the price of doing business and while Italy's export markets expanded, conditions for its people did not.¹⁶ Central to this malaise, as Wolfgang Streeck has argued, was a growing democratic deficit attributable to the neoliberal separation of economic and political spheres that Maastricht copperfastened.¹⁷ This trend has been labelled 'authoritarian liberalism' by the legal scholar Michael Wilkinson, who observes that the post-war European state gradually underwent a 'structural transformation, a re-differentiation of the political and the economic spheres' where economic matters were taken 'out of the public domain of democratic power and accountability'.¹⁸ Wilkinson describes authoritarian liberalism as a 'conjunction of political authoritarianism and economic liberalism', which is liberal 'in the sense that it de-politicises the economy, naturalizes inequalities, and promotes markets, competition and private ownership'.¹⁹ The naturalization of this process in Italy was enhanced by the fact that it was embraced by both sides of the political aisle, as evidenced for example by the austerity and privatization drives pursued by Romano Prodi's mid-1990s centre-left coalition to meet requirements for Eurozone membership set out in the Treaty. The mainstream cross-party willingness to embrace EU-imposed austerity measures during the Eurozone debt crisis provides another case in point, and one that again naturalized the neoliberal axiom that 'there is no alternative', a mindset that is having increasingly toxic repercussions for democracy.²⁰ For Wilkinson, the EU finds itself at a critical juncture, one not unlike Gramsci's interregnum, where it is 'entrapped in a fractious position, unable to move forward or backward', its policies of authoritarian liberalism 'fomenting the politics of an authoritarian populism that it was meant to prevent but with which it appears to be mutually dependent'.²¹ The end game is not less authoritarianism but more, with an increasingly large body of evidence suggesting that the end-product of Maastricht-era progress is not the peaceful prosperity that the signatories of the Treaty of Rome imagined, but a respanning of the fascist impulses that they sought to bury.²²

Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss

In feeding public apathy by encouraging the suspicion that all politicians are the same, authoritarian liberalism leaves the door ajar for additional post-democratic solutions to neoliberal problems. Chief amongst these is the figure of the technocrat — the hatchet man of neoliberalism — who emerges in times of crisis to carry out the sort of reforms that democratically elected politicians struggle to push through. In an Italian context these reforms typically mean austerity measures that are passed off as necessary to

save the neoliberal system, the logics of which are in turn passed off as natural and above reproach. Within neoliberal discourse, Gentili writes, 'natural cycles, repetition, and the stability of the established order regain their primacy over the historicity and progressive linearity of the modern notion of time', with the temporality of neoliberal crises 'fully inscribed within a 'natural history' determined by the absence of alternatives.²³ This lack of choice is exemplified by the fact that in the sixteen-odd years spanning the beginning of the Eurozone crisis and the end of the Covid crisis, not a single prime minister selected by the president was drawn from politicians directly elected by Italian voters, Meloni being the first since Silvio Berlusconi in 2008. Both of these crises, moreover, provide noteworthy examples of the post-democratic imposition of technocratic rule. The repetition of this cycle is evidenced by some uncanny similarities between the political responses to the two crises, which I will now quickly summarize in order to contextualize the analysis of *Lazzaro* that follows.

At the height of the Eurozone crisis, the so-called Troika of International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission, and the European Central Bank pushed strongly to remove Berlusconi from office. On 4 November 2011, as his country amassed close to €2 trillion in sovereign debt, a previously sanguine Berlusconi acknowledged in his closing remarks at the Group of 20(G20) summit in Cannes that the IMF had offered Italy a rescue package, sending Italian borrowing costs skyrocketing to near 7.5%.²⁴ Having failed to gather parliamentary support for the implementation of new austerity measures and having failed to convince the EU that he possessed the will to do so, the three-time prime minister accepted EU oversight of the Italian economy before resigning. In his place emerged Mario Monti, an unelected technocratic banker who was summoned by the similarly unelected Italian President Giorgio Napolitano to preside over a 'unity government'. While acknowledging that this process meant that democracy had been effectively curtailed,²⁵ Monti insisted that no alternative was possible and proceeded to pass a series of brutal austerity measures to calm the market. These measures, which included gutting pensions, loosening job protections, and deregulating labour markets, effectively curtailed the futures of a whole generation of Italians who from the outset had no say in the process.²⁶

Nine years later, on 13 February 2021, the one-time Prime Minister Matteo Renzi withdrew his centrist Italia Viva party's support for the ruling Movimento Cinque Stelle-led coalition, triggering a constitutional crisis and ultimately the collapse of the government. Faced with a new crisis in COVID-19, Napolitano's unelected successor Sergio Mattarella summoned Mario Draghi, an unelected technocrat²⁷ and ex-president of the European Central Bank, to preside over a 'unity government'. Saddled with the second largest public debt in the EU, Draghi's technocratic government swiftly pushed through a series of austerity measures in return for EU stimulus packages.²⁸ Standing above political divides enabled Draghi to underplay the neoliberal assumptions underpinning his actions and further naturalize the separation of economic and democratic spheres. The Italian left, meanwhile, which had long since splintered in the wake of historic compromises with neoliberalism, consoled themselves that further technocratic rule would at least keep the far right out of government, and in the process confirmed that there was indeed no mainstream alternative to the economic status quo. By October of the following year, however, and after eighteen further months of the same failed technocratic solutions, a jaded, historically small electorate

turned to Meloni, and the crumbling edifice of a post-war consensus that begat liberal democracy in a European sphere finally came tumbling down. Neoliberal policies — which emerged as a corrective to social democratic gains made in the post-war period — had reached their logical endpoint.²⁹

My Bitter Land

Emerging to critical acclaim in 2018, *Lazzaro felice* is uniquely placed to apprehend the turn towards authoritarian liberalism, its timeless central protagonist Lazzaro serving as an undying angel of history who bears witness to the neoliberal straitjacketing of Italian democracy. To be clear, this is my reading of *Lazzaro*, one that I will support with contextualized formal analysis. My intention here is not to create *the* reading of the film — there is of course no such reading available — but to instead consider how it responds subtextually to the highly charged socio-economic environment from which it emerged. Crucially, the Christ-like characterization of Lazzaro enables the film's writer/director Alice Rohrwacher to move beyond realist conventions in her narrative, a strategy that allows her to apprehend the fantasies expounded by apologists for the status quo, fantasies that large swathes of the Italian electorate plainly stopped believing. Rohrwacher has stated that, not unlike neoliberalism in Italy, the narrative has origins in the 1980s, but the film, as we shall see, contains several conspicuous and telling references to mid-1990s culture.³⁰ Shot with the revealing working title of *My Bitter Land*, the film follows the eponymous Lazzaro (Adriano Tardiolo), a kind-hearted, ingenuous young sharecropper on a remote tobacco plantation named 'Inviolata' (meaning pure) at an initially indeterminate point in Italian history. Like his fellow workers, Lazzaro is in thrall to the Marchesa Alfonsina De Luna (Nicoletta Braschi), a feudal tobacco baroness who presides over an illegal *mezzadria* system that keeps sharecroppers in constant debt and thus tied to the land. After he is coerced into staging the kidnapping of the Marchesa's manipulative son Tancredi (Luca Chikovani), Lazzaro inadvertently triggers an investigation that leads police to the plantation where — much to their incredulity — they learn that it has been cut off from society since the Great Floods of 1977 and that the workers have no idea that their exploitation is illegal. In the meantime, the unfortunate Lazzaro falls from a cliff while searching for Tancredi and apparently dies. His fellow workers are freed by the police, but then are swiftly neglected by the state and forced into a life of itinerant squalor on the margins of an anonymous Northern Italian city. We next see a remarkably unchanged Lazzaro being awakened by a wolf some decades later, before rising from the dead like his biblical namesake and strolling through Inviolata, where he encounters two men ransacking the Marchesa's long-abandoned mansion. After unwittingly helping them out, Lazzaro follows the two men to the city where he meets a group of villagers from the plantation who are astonished by his still youthful appearance. It transpires that their story had been a brief sensation before a restless media moved on and they were largely forgotten. Unlike the villagers, however, Lazzaro displays no bitterness about his plight. A chance encounter soon sees him reunite with Tancredi who now runs a failing nightclub after the banks seized his family fortune. In a heart-breaking scene shortly after, Tancredi invites the surprised villagers to his rundown apartment before renegeing on the invitation when they arrive.

On their way home, a nun adds to their misery by chasing them out of a conspicuously baroque church as Johann Sebastian Bach's 'Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott/Have Mercy on me o Lord' plays on the church organ. Disillusioned, and with nowhere else to turn, the villagers discuss the possibility of returning to Inviolata and seizing the land for themselves. Lazzaro instead stays behind to ask a local bank to return the De Luna fortune to Tancredi, but after mistaking his actions for a robbery, the bank's panicked customers beat him to death. As he lies prone on the bank floor, the wolf returns to examine his lifeless body, before fleeing to the countryside in the film's haunting final scene.

From first to last frame, *Lazzaro* literalizes the immiseration of the Italian working class and, unsurprisingly, early reviewers were swift to pick up on the film's anti-capitalist undertones. Writing for *Film Comment*, Amy Taubin called it 'a condemnation of Italy's upper class and the supposedly benevolent Italian state for exploiting the most vulnerable and pitting the have-littles against the have-nothings',³¹ while Erika Balsom noted in *Sight in Sound* that the film 'uses its bifurcated form to stage a confrontation between feudalism and modern capitalism, finding fundamental — and fundamentally injurious — similarities between the two'.³² Rohrwacher partially endorsed such a view, stating that 'as soon as you tell a story in two time periods, you tend to establish a comparison. But that wasn't exactly what interested me. I wanted to use the two periods like two mirrors, reflecting each other'.³³ Rohrwacher, who was born in 1981, is clearly sceptical about Italy's progress and has accordingly described the film in allegorical terms, noting that

the fracture in Lazzaro's story, his collapse, represents the fracture that has taken place in my country, Italy. Over the last 50 years we have fallen off a cliff. From today's perspective it's hard to say whether the situation is now better or worse. Everything has changed, yet everything remains the same.³⁴

This situation is borne out by the film's villagers, whose fortunes navigating the outer margins of neoliberal Italy are little better than their experiences of mezzadria under the Marchesa. In its magic realist commitment to blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, moreover, *Lazzaro* upends the neoliberal fantasy that free markets will lead to societal progress. Instead, Gentili's assertion that '[neoliberal] natural cycles, repetition, and the stability of the established order regain their primacy over the historicity and progressive linearity of the modern notion of time'³⁵ finds expression in the film's circular narrative, exemplified both by the beleaguered villagers' uncertainty about returning to Inviolata and by Lazzaro dying twice. In this the film is very much of its time, for sustaining this same myth of progress for the Italian working class is infinitely more difficult now than it was at the outset of European integration. Most obviously the opening decade of Italy's membership of the European Economic Community coincided with the *miracolo economico*, with new markets emerging for Italian exports, and internal reforms widening, and in some cases establishing social safety nets. Of these, the Land Reform Laws have most obvious resonance for *Lazzaro*, for although the film's villagers are initially unaware of the fact, sharecropping was made illegal at the height of the economic miracle in 1964, a move that wealthy landowners duly denounced as a communist plot that encroached upon private enterprise.³⁶ The Marchesa exploits the floods to keep the villagers removed from the outside world, a ploy that lasts until they are inadvertently discovered by the police in the mid-1990s, at

the outset of the Second Republic. That they are subsequently ostracized by the authorities, however, should not altogether surprise us, given the trajectory of the Italian state during this period, a trajectory that the ageless Lazzaro, not unlike Benjamin's Angel of History, bears witness to.

With this in mind, Rohrwacher's 2018 reference to fifty years of falling off a cliff feels pointed, and only partly because Lazzaro literally falls from a cliff to what we initially presume to be his death. Her analysis leads us directly to 1968 and the origins of the 'hot autumn', a moment when workers across the north's largest factories demanded that the rewards of the economic miracle be more equally distributed. Gains made then and during the early 1970s — when union activity was at a peak — were swiftly eroded during the tail end of the decade as the balance of power was restored, a process abetted by the socialist Bettino Craxi's pursuit of a third way in the 1980s³⁷ and accelerated by deregulation drives undertaken by his unofficial protégé Berlusconi at the dawn of the Second Republic — policies that led to the proliferation of precarious labour practices across the peninsula.³⁸ Lazzaro, who seemingly exists outside of history, bears witness to this change, his characterization operating as a visual rebuke to claims that such modernization represents progress. The theme of Lazzaro as witness is plainly encouraged by Rohrwacher and, as the film progresses, takes on a decidedly Benjaminian tenor, one that we can link to the uncanny presence of the wolf. I will elaborate on this link in my conclusion, but firstly I want to attend to specifics, for Rohrwacher does not limit herself to broad allegory. A contextualized examination of *Lazzaro's* narrative and form will instead reveal a sustained critique of the neoliberal takeover of the Italian Second Republic in operation under the film's surface.

Meet the New Boss, the Same as the Old Boss

From the outset, Lazzaro and his fellow villagers are presented as victims of history, forever outsiders in the spaces in which they dwell. This sense of marginality is emphasized by their habitation on the literal edges of society, first in the hinterlands of the Marchesa's plantation and latterly in the shapeless edges of an esoteric metropolis (in reality the outskirts of Turin and Milan). The geographical vagueness serves to accentuate the universality of their experience or, as Rohrwacher puts it, to 'create a place that is very real, and at the same moment everywhere, like in fairy tales'.³⁹ Even so, the political critique is specific and emerges in the film's foregrounding of the interregnum between the end of the First Republic and the establishment of the Second, an especially turbulent period when the *Mani pulite* scandal brought down Giulio Andreotti's government, and neoliberalism became the dominant mode in Italian politics. This interregnum was notable for the passing of the baton between arguably the two most dominant figures in post-war Italian politics: Andreotti, the seven-time Christian Democrat prime minister, and Silvio Berlusconi, the longest serving post-war prime minister (and more recently a junior partner in Giorgia Meloni's governing coalition).⁴⁰ Although neither Andreotti nor Berlusconi is ever mentioned by name, the spectres of both haunt the narrative of *Lazzaro* and, as I will now argue, their connection has particular relevance to the relationship between the Marchesa and her son Tancredi.

The Marchesa is largely an absentee landlord, but when she does visit Inviolata, she resides in a large mansion that only a select handful of servant village children are

allowed to enter. Keen to keep her subjects at a physical distance from the power structures that shape their existence, she observes the villagers from a watchtower and has curtains hung in the downstairs dining room to keep them from looking in the windows. This physical distance echoes the conceptual distance between the villagers and the truth of their existence, a false consciousness perpetuated by the Marchesa's estate manager Nicola (Natalino Balasso) who deploys arcane accounting methods to keep the villagers in debt.⁴¹ This exploitation is facilitated by the Catholic Church in the guise of Don Severino (Marco Donno), a corrupt priest who accompanies Nicola on his rounds and inculcates the children in Catholic dogma, but saves his blessings for the Marchesa's new thresher. The Marchesa's remoteness aligns her with the famously inscrutable Andreotti, as do her close ties with the Catholic church, which the film depicts as uncaring and corrupt.⁴² Her cynical use of Catholicism helps maintain her control over her subjects and the church in turn helps naturalize her methods, a state of cultural hegemony (to return to Gramsci) that should be familiar in an Italian context, given the Vatican's endorsement of Andreotti, to say nothing of the hold that his Democrazia Cristiana party held over a post-war state that it governed for thirty-five years.⁴³ Selective use of Catholic teaching similarly allows the Marchesa to permanently postpone the villagers' futures, and she takes time to personally teach the children about the eternal rewards they will receive in the next life for the labour that creates her fortune in the present one.⁴⁴ The Marchesa's cynicism is on full display in a conversation with Tancredi in the watchtower, which begins with her observing Lazzaro performing menial chores for the other villagers who have stopped working for the evening (Figure 1). Underscoring this exchange is a knowing deployment of film form that foreshadows the coming narrative and makes the film's political critique explicit. Rohrwacher's decision to shoot in twilight is revealing, as is the strong wind that suddenly blows across the plantation and heralds change as Lazzaro works. Inside the tower the camera tracks rightward to reveal Tancredi who, like his namesake in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's historical novel *Il Gattopardo*, is a would-be-reformer. He is initially alone in the frame (Figure 2) as he tentatively asks his mother if she is afraid that the workers will find out about the truth of their existence (Figure 3).

The Marchesa's response (Figure 4) is characteristically blunt, declaring coldly that 'human beings are like animals, set them free and they become aware of their condition as slaves, of being destined to suffer. Now they suffer, but they are not aware of it'. Tancredi's solitude in the frame at this point (Figure 5) gestures towards his nascent rebelliousness, yet the possibility that he represents a real break from the Marchesa is dismissed before the film's end, a fate foreshadowed by the scene's careful



Figure 1. The Marchesa Alfonsina De Luna (Nicoletta Braschi).



Figure 2. Tancredi (Luca Chikovani).



Figure 3. Tancredi.

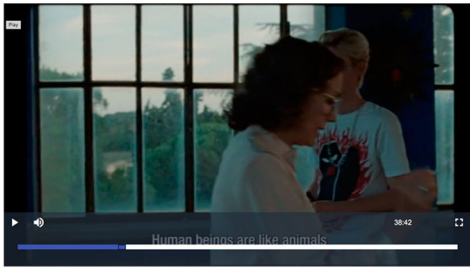


Figure 4. 'Human beings are like animals'.



Figure 5. 'Set them free and they become aware of their condition as slaves'.

formal construction. As she begins her lecture on false consciousness, the Marchesa enters the frame, partially blocking Tancredi and concealing his face, thereby distancing him from her remark, while simultaneously establishing her dominance. She then moves out of shot so that in the next frame he is alone again as he ponders the implications of her words. The Marchesa then walks back into shot to look down at Lazzaro working in the yard below (Figure 6). A strategic use of blocking sees Tancredi momentarily disappear (Figures 7 and 8), simultaneously emphasizing the generational power dynamic, while also suggesting that they are ultimately two of a kind by merging them into one visible body. Tancredi retorts with a jaded 'nice words' as he moves forward to look down at Lazzaro (Figure 9), a movement that hints at an independent streak by leaving him alone again in the frame (Figure 10). By this point the evening light outside is notably beginning to fade. Even so, the Marchesa's words narrate what he and the audience sees ('I exploit them, and they exploit that poor man. It's a chain reaction. It can't be stopped'), underscoring her power over the narrative up to this point and emphasizing that hers is the voice of authority (Figures 11 and 12). The scene immediately cuts back inside the tower (Figure 13), where a dubious Tancredi — in the back of the shot, but in focus — hesitantly responds that maybe Lazzaro does not exploit anyone. His mother's rebuttal ('That's impossible') is emphatic, but her certainty is undermined by a shallow focus that is detectable for the first time and that perceptibly blurs the Marchesa's profile (Figure 14). Although she remains in the foreground of the shot and nominally dominant, she also begins to fade, foreshadowing her imminent demise and more elliptically the eclipsing of Andreotti by Berlusconi. Therefore, while the resultant cut to a close-up of the new thresher (Figure 15) — a machine that literally separates the wheat from the chaff — seemingly underscores the Marchesa's unflinching take on capitalist realism, it also gestures towards her own complacency, as she fails to consider that she too, not unlike Andreotti, will become swallowed up by reforms to a system that will keep on rolling in her absence. Tellingly, the media dub the events surrounding the Marchesa's downfall as 'Il Grande Inganno/The Great Swindle', a moniker that instantly recalls the corrupt 'Tangentopoli/Bribesville' system that the early 1990s 'Mani pulite/clean hands' judicial investigation exposed, precipitating a scandal that effectively ended the First Republic. Despite her demise, however, systemic exploitation endures for the villagers for, just as Mani pulite removed Andreotti from the centre stage of Italian politics, the Second Republic, of which we can view Tancredi as a representative, doubled down on the neoliberal path that he and others like him helped pave. Rohrwacher's expressive

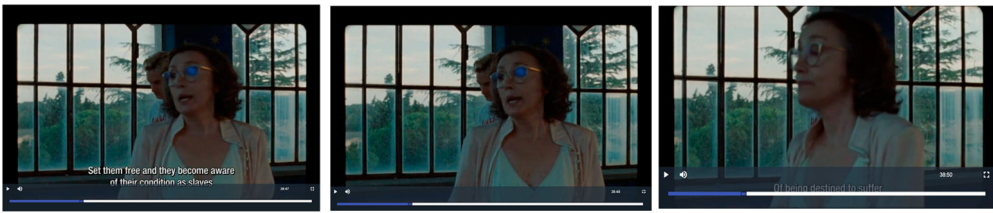


Figure 6. The Marchesa and **Figures 7 and 8.** A strategic use of blocking. Tancredi.

use of twilight — the interregnum between day and night — throughout the scene evokes the interregnum between First and Second Republics, but events prove that while the old way may be dying, a meaningfully new way struggles to be born. Again, the knowing arrangement of *mise-en-scène* is revealing. At all times during their conversation, the Marchesa and Tancredi are framed by metal bars that reinforce their ascendancy at the literal apex of the plantation. The metal bars, which literally restrict their view of the outside world, gesture instead towards their ideological imprisonment, and suggest a wider complicity that Tancredi's rebelliousness only partially masks; for while he might support unspecified reforms, he never displays any genuine willingness to forego the gains that his status provides him. Tellingly, when he encounters the villagers in the city years later, he feigns interest in them by inviting them all to lunch at his apartment. Instead of telling them his address, however, Tancredi makes a point of saying he will give them his business card, which he then cannot find: the first indication that all is not what it seems. A knowing exchange of looks between Lazzaro and Antonia (played in adulthood by Rohrwacher's sister Alba) suggests a healthy suspicion of businessmen's promises; she, in particular, has heard them all before **Figures 16, 17, 18**.⁴⁵

Tancredi's invitation comes with the insistence that they dress appropriately for 'an official invitation in a respectable house', but what they encounter instead is the outside of a squalid flat, where Tancredi's wife turns them away from his doorstep. The historic nature of this betrayal is emphasized immediately before Tancredi extends his invitation when, implausibly, the villagers suddenly appear as they did in the mid-1990s again (which necessitates the younger characters being played by child actors), before a light is switched on and their regular appearance is restored (**Figures 19, 20, 21**). For a brief moment the neoliberal order is upended and the progressive linearity of the modern notion of time restored, but this utopian moment does not survive contact with reality.⁴⁶ Instead, the optimistic, carefree children are replaced by their

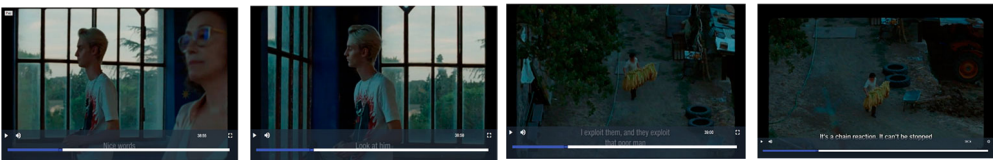


Figure 9. 'Nice words'. **Figure 10.** Tancredi alone. **Figure 11.** 'I exploit them, and they exploit that poor man'. **Figure 12.** 'It's a chain reaction. It can't be stopped'.

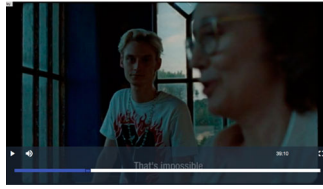
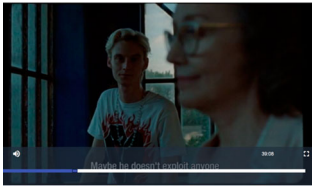
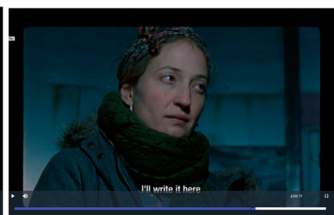
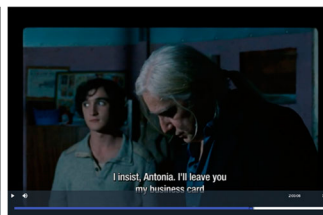
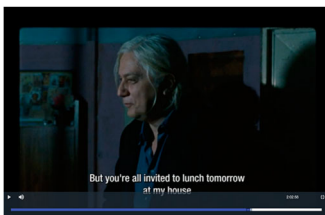


Figure 13. ‘Maybe he doesn’t exploit anyone’. **Figure 14.** ‘That’s impossible’. **Figure 15.** The new thresher.

jaded adult counterparts who have experienced first-hand the distance between promises and reality in Second Republic Italy.

The link between Tancredi, the Second Republic and the businessman-cum-politician Berlusconi is made explicit soon after Tancredi’s discussion with the Marchesa, when Lazzaro visits him in the hills during his fake kidnapping. Although the allusion is subtle, it further establishes Tancredi’s connection to Berlusconi. The scene in question is set up with three shots: a long shot of Lazzaro climbing a hill (Figure 22), a seemingly random close-up of a Walkman (Figure 23), and a medium close-up of Tancredi combing his hair (Figure 24). The fact that we see the Walkman before we see Tancredi is significant as the cut between shots establishes the thematic link between it and him. Equally significant is the song playing, a Europop track by 2 Brothers on the 4th Floor entitled ‘Dreams (Will Come Alive)’. The song was released in 1994, the year the Second Republic was formed, and Berlusconi was first elected prime minister having promised to resolve the political crisis stemming from *Mani pulite*.⁴⁷ Specifically, Berlusconi promised to create one million new jobs via a massive deregulation drive, and in a precursor to his later alliance with Meloni, forged a coalition with Fratelli d’Italia’s forebears, the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale. Within months of being elected, however, Berlusconi’s pursuance of austerity measures, including cuts to pensions and health benefits, to facilitate his ‘modernization’ of the economy was met by a general strike.⁴⁸ His ruling coalition lasted nine months before he was forced to resign in January 1995 following corruption charges, but in a turn of events that should by now be familiar to us, Berlusconi’s pension reforms were passed the following August by the unity government of Lamberto Dini, an unelected technocrat and former banker.⁴⁹ ‘Dreams (Will Come Alive)’ is notable for being one of the rare pieces of diegetic music in *Lazzaro*, and it performs a very specific function in ironically highlighting the distance between the promises and lived realities of neoliberal conceptions of



Figures 16, 17, 18. A knowing exchange of looks.

progress. Appropriately, the song opens with a chorus calling for blind optimism that echoes Berlusconi's electoral promises:

Dreams to survive, dreams make a wish come true,
Oooh. Keep your dreams alive
Dream ... dream on your dream will come alive

The first verse doubles down on the axiomatic confluence of sameness and difference: the emphasis on the future recalling Berlusconi's efforts to move on from the collapse of the First Republic while not dwelling too closely on the corruption that precipitated it; the call for a slow pace to assure the skittish ruling classes that despite the turbulence, they could anticipate a reversal to the mean that would not upend the status quo.

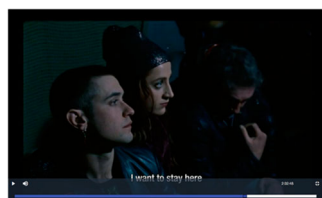
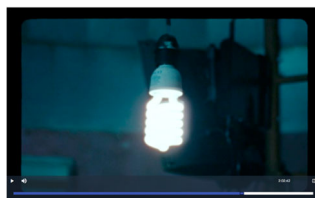
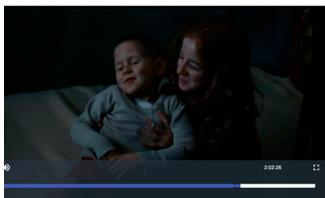
Go for what you know don't let it slide,
Take a change let's ride.
To the future not to the past,
Take it easy and not too fast.

The lines that immediately follow speak almost uncannily to neoliberal dogma in excoriating societal failures and advocating for free markets, the privileging of personal freedoms doubling down on neoliberal hegemony by insisting that the pain engendered by austerity is a natural process, and not a result of ideological choices:

Many failed in society,
Too blind to see you need to be free.
Free from the strain that causes pain,
Pain is the name and life is the game.

The wordplay here is revealing and calls to mind the contention of Berlusconi's self-proclaimed idol Margaret Thatcher that 'there is no such thing as society': emphasizing that those left behind are not failed *by* society but are *failures in* society.⁵⁰ Presumably these same failures lack the requisite vision to embrace a new world order where the entrepreneur Berlusconi is king. Pain in this context is thus naturalized as a necessary corrective of economic shock therapy, its biopolitical impact (life) dismissed as part of the game.⁵¹ The final two lines of the song recur in each of its three verses, serving a doubly reflexive function:

Listen here's the clue: Let it flow before it's all gone
Come on boy you got to dream on.



Figures 19, 20, 21. A light is switched on.

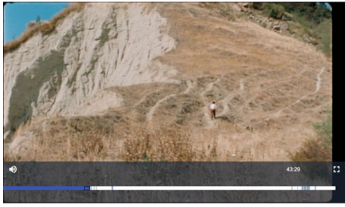


Figure 22. Lazzaro climbing.



Figure 23. The Walkman.



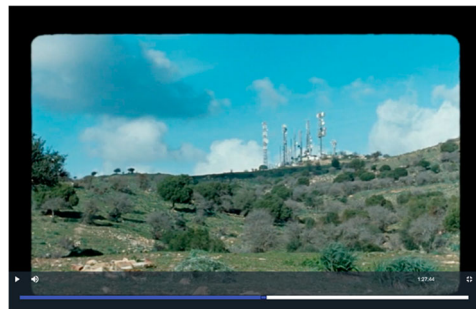
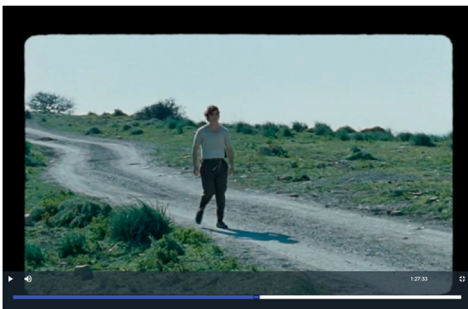
Figure 24. Tancredi close-up.

The repetition of these lines formally connotes the repetition of the crisis-laden neoliberal cycle, while nevertheless anticipating an inevitable collapse. Letting it flow before it's all gone is a mantra that Berlusconi lived by, as the lurid decadence of the Bunga Bunga scandal attests, but the line also neatly encapsulates the death wish of an economic system built upon endless expansion on a planet with rapidly diminishing resources.⁵² In narrative terms, moreover, the lines foreshadow Tancredi's eventual fate as an incontinent nightclub owner who squanders what remains of his family fortune. The direct address to a dreaming boy speaks to Tancredi's delusion that he represents a significant departure from his mother, when in reality they prove to be equally indifferent to the plight of the disenfranchised, a shared characteristic that their contrasting personalities only superficially disguise. Therefore, while her Andreotti-like reserve contrasts sharply with his Berlusconi-like extravagance, the unequal system they both profit from continues apace, the cautionary tale of the *Il Grande Inganno*/Mani pulite scandal all but forgotten as the system corrects to absorb the attendant crisis and — not unlike the Marchesa's thresher — carry on grinding.

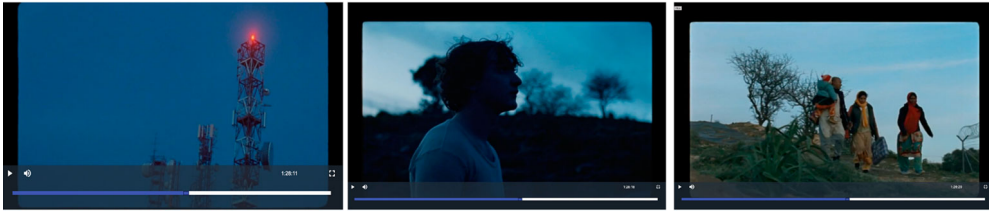
Notably 'Dreams (Will Come Alive)' resurfaces with the adult Tancredi in the second half of the film, shortly after Pippo (Carlo Massimino), the youngest of the villagers, reads Lazzaro a framed newspaper account of *Il Grande Inganno*. Like his fellow survivors, Pippo is able to recite the account by heart, the memory of their immiseration still fresh in their minds, even if it is clear that the rest of Italian society has long since moved on.⁵³ The song appears immediately before Lazzaro encounters Tancredi for the first time since they were children, playing on a light entertainment show that Lazzaro watches on a television in the villagers' city dwelling.⁵⁴ Onscreen, an elderly female presenter dances awkwardly to the banal beat, a nod to the degrading showgirl trope popularized on Berlusconi's satellite channels that reduced women to performing exhibits.⁵⁵ Lazzaro watches intently, as around him the impoverished villagers eat a meagre dinner and argue about whether there are enough edible plants growing in the surrounding concrete to warrant selling them at the market. The disparity between sound and image is stark, and remains so in the next scene when Lazzaro encounters Tancredi in the latter's nightclub, a conspicuously rundown space that further emphasizes the distance between dreams and reality, and by proxy lays bare the false promises of the Second Republic (to hammer home the point, an acoustic version of Celentano's 'Si è spento il sole/The Sun has Gone Out' plays when Lazzaro enters).

Appropriately enough, we can locate the precise moment of transition between first and second Republics at the mid-point of the film, in a scene that strongly evokes the

outsized influence of Berlusconi's media empire. The second half of the film, which we can equate to the Second Republic, sees the reborn Lazzaro leave the plantation to literally begin his new life in the peripheries of urban Italy. This new life takes place in contemporary Italy, inviting us to trace the impact of a near quarter-century of neoliberal reforms. Having inadvertently helped ransack the Marchesa's villa, Lazzaro makes his way over rural hills and heads towards the city in the scene in question. A brief, seemingly incongruous episode interrupts his journey — one, however, that directly foreshadows the future that the authoritarian liberalism of the Second Republic will usher in. On his journey through the hills Lazzaro is suddenly confronted with a group of television transmitters in a moment that makes little sense unless we consider the spectre of Berlusconi — the media magnate whose accumulation of political power went hand in hand with the meteoritic rise of his television empire. The formal construction of this scene is highly revealing, with the film's cinematographer H el ene Louvart shooting the transmitters as if they were from outer space, estranging them from the surrounding landscape by framing them in medium close-up against the deep blue Italian sky. The calculated sense of alienation is enhanced by a rare use of a specially commissioned piece of non-diegetic music, 'Antennae', by Rohrwacher's long-time collaborator Piero Crucitti. The piece is otherworldly in its blend of electronic and organ music, and notably we hear it before we see the transmitters, alerting us and Lazzaro, who pauses as soon as it plays (Figure 25), to their looming presence. Accordingly, when they do appear, they do so as a blot on the landscape, which will never quite be the same again (Figure 26). Night falls as he walks among them, the scene cutting between a shot of three transmitters — the tallest featuring a blinking red light — and a close-up of Lazzaro, his face shrouded in shadow, yet staring directly at the light, as if in silent communication (Figures 27 and 28). It is not immediately clear what he takes from the encounter; however, the blinking light — cold, remote, and inhuman — undoubtedly signals the arrival of a new day, both figuratively, in that Italy after Berlusconi will never be the same, and literally, for the scene jarringly concludes with an abrupt cut to an early morning shot of a migrant family walking past a barbed wire fence (Figure 29). Lazzaro follows the family to a nondescript industrial estate where he encounters Nicola, the erstwhile estate manager, who is conducting an ad hoc labour market where migrants compete with one another for an olive picking job at a nearby farm. Where once Nicola exploited the sharecropping villagers by devaluing their labour after they completed it, here the process begins



Figures 25 and 26. The transmitters.



Figures 27 and 28. Silent communication.

Figure 29. An abrupt cut.

before work commences. The twist is that he runs the labour market like a reverse auction, where workers are forced to drive down the price of their labour; a woman eventually ‘wins’ by offering to work for one euro per crate, a quarter of Nicola’s opening offer. Lazzaro stands among them, silently observing, his unchanged clothes and appearance accentuating his timeless quality, his spectral presence an indictment of Italy’s progress during the lifespan of the Second Republic. Out here in the periphery, he encounters the gig economy at its purest, the whole perverse process designed to disregard protections, accelerate competition, shatter solidarity, and ultimately suppress wages to maximize profit for landowners. Like us, Lazzaro can only look on in vain, our sense of helplessness accentuated by retrospective awareness of what is coming down the tracks, armed as we are with the knowledge that the scapegoating of such migrants would be a central plank of Meloni’s rise to power, a rise facilitated by a generation of politicians who slavishly adhered to the whims of the market while insisting that there was no alternative.

Night Approaches

Rohrwacher expertly ties the various strands of her critique together in the film’s final scene, when the spectre of Lazzaro as witness takes on its most fervently Benjaminian tenor. The scene begins appropriately enough in a bank, where Lazzaro is murdered by a group of customers who have grown so accustomed to being robbed by banks that the thought of the opposite occurring causes them to temporarily lose their minds. Immediately before they begin feverishly beating Lazzaro to death, the wolf — which only we and Lazzaro can see — appears for the second time. The two exchange a knowing look right before the first blow lands, and once the beating concludes, the wolf heads back towards the countryside, running directly towards a moving camera that it will never catch, a breathing embodiment of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, which also faces forward, but is turned towards the past (Figures 30 and 31).

The angel appears in part IX of Benjamin’s essay, immediately after his reminder in part VIII that ‘the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘emergency situation’ in which we live is the rule’.⁵⁶ The angel is a visual rebuke to progress narratives, for ‘where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe’, a storm driving him ‘into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high’.⁵⁷ ‘That which we call progress’, Benjamin reminds us, ‘is *this* storm’.⁵⁸ The scene’s formal construction actively calls for contemplation of the

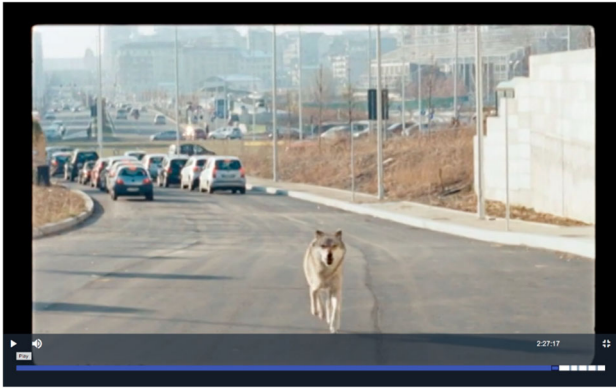


Figure 30. An angel of history.

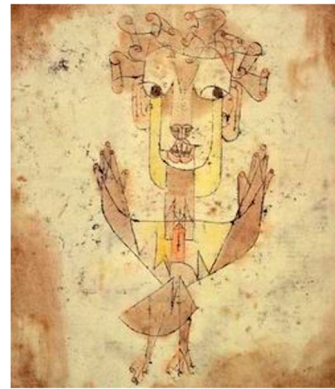


Figure 31. The Angel of History.

wolf, the shot lasting a full 16 seconds which allows the animal's accusatory stare to register, its eyes and mouth open like Benjamin's angel, which is prevented from staying to 'awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed'.⁵⁹ The background of the shot is nondescript, the *mise-en-scène* punctuated by a grey and brown colour palette that leaves little else to catch our eye, all the better to establish a mundane image of everyday life in operation. The film provides a subtle twist in that the wolf moves forward, unlike Benjamin's angel which is blown backward by the storm of progress; but the wolf's pace is matched by that of the camera, which maintains a distance between us and it, a distance that will never be bridged. Like the angel, the wolf wants to warn us of the impending disaster, but it never will. Instead the scene cuts to black and holds, allowing time to let the message sink in before the final credits roll. The last time the wolf appeared, the narrative jumped forward thirty years, but like the villagers, it is unclear where the wolf will now go. All that is certain is that like them, it will remain even after we stop watching, bearing witness to a society where economic consensus has failed abjectly, fascism is again resurgent and things are in fact getting significantly worse. The moment is quietly revelatory in that it exists outside of time and in so doing upends neoliberal conceptualizations of progress. No live person within the film's diegesis can see the wolf, and yet there it moves: tellingly, against the grain of the onrushing traffic, unassimilable but always observing. A spectre haunting a late Italian afternoon where the light is surely fading, and the night is slowly closing in.

Notes

1. Karin Schiefer, 'Interview with Alice Rohrwacher', *Eurimages*, November 2018.
2. Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) is the political grandchild of the now defunct Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), which was founded by Mussolini supporters in 1946. Fdi emerged from the breakup of MSI's successor Alleanza Nazionale, whose youth wing Meloni was national leader of. Emphasizing the link, Fdi maintain the MSI's flaming tricolour logo.
3. 'As soon as [capital] begins to sense itself and become conscious of itself as a barrier to development, it seeks refuge in forms which, by restricting free competition, seem to make the rule of capital more perfect, but are the same time the heralds of its dissolution and of the dissolution of the mode of production resting on it.' Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*:

- Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Marxists.org, 1939), p. 651 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/>> [accessed 8 December 2023].
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2005), p. 276.
 5. Meloni most obviously exploited the fallout from the refugee crisis by vowing, amongst other pledges, to blockade the Mediterranean to prevent migrants arriving on Italian shores. Her navigation of the Covid crisis, meanwhile, was more nuanced than that of adversaries on the far right, allowing her to burnish her credentials as a responsible future leader.
 6. Dario Gentili, *The Age of Precarity: Endless Crisis as an Art of Government* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), p. 63.
 7. Ibid.
 8. In his detailed data analysis of neoliberalism in Italy, the political scientist Adriano Cozzolino writes: 'Such dynamics are therefore inscribed into the long-term trajectory of the anti-democratic restructuring of democratic procedures. The institutional changes which occurred after the crisis of 2007–8 and the sovereign debt crisis of 2010–11 can be regarded as the mature phase of neoliberal governance, the foundations of which had been laid and consolidated in the previous decades. What is at stake in this overall trajectory of neoliberalization is the need to recognize the structural tension between the liberal-democratic state form and 'market' — especially finance — rule. While the crisis of neoliberalism unfolds, the crisis of parliamentary democracy continues to intensify: the obsessive quest for stability via empowering "markets" through decision-making centralization has left us with systemic instabilities and a structural crisis of political legitimation.' In 'Reconfiguring the State: Executive Powers, Emergency Legislation, and Neoliberalization in Italy', *Globalizations*, 16.3 (2019), 336–52 (p. 348).
 9. The imposition of savage spending cuts in response to Eurozone contagion is a textbook example.
 10. Gentili, pp. 63–64.
 11. For an ecological reading of *Lazzaro*, see Laura di Bianco, 'Ecocinema Ars et Praxis: Alice Rohrwacher's *Lazzaro felice*', *The Italianist*, 40.2 (2020), 151–64, and especially Lucia Della Fontana's 'Analogue Film, Ghostly Ontologies, and the Fairy-Tale in *Bella e perduta* and *Lazzaro felice*', *Between*, 12.24 (2022), 203–23.
 12. See Aidan Power, 'Eurocentrism, The Anthropocene and Climate Migration in *Aniara*', *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 50.3 (2021), p. 47.
 13. At the time some analysts went so far as to speculate the end of the neoliberal cycle, hopes that now look increasingly misguided as we seemingly head into another age of austerity. For a period, however, the non-negotiables that assailed the Eurozone crisis suddenly became negotiable, exposing cracks in economic dogma. Far from pursuing a radical constitutional re-imagination, however, the EU has reverted to type, with a retrenchment of neoliberal edicts evident in all aspects of its policies. Economically, it quickly became evident that stimulus packages were overwhelmingly weighted towards corporate interests, while European Central Bank loans came with significant strings attached, a quid pro quo that demanded familiar 'reforms', which in reality equate to the imposition of austerity on whole sections of society. Elsewhere, even before the pandemic, the EU's much-vaunted Green Deal was described by Yanis Varoufakis and David Adler as 'a colossal exercise in greenwashing', and from the outset was inherently neoliberal insofar as its very parameters were tailored to privatize the profits and socialize the risks of new green energy ventures. See 'The EU's Green Deal Is a Colossal Exercise in Greenwashing', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2020. The EU's vaccine hoarding saliently exemplified its neoliberal impulses, as did its refusal to waive vaccine patents, a move that even US President Joe Biden called for, but that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen dismissed on the grounds that doing so would be disruptive to 'private-sector ingenuity'. See 'Ramaphosa Slams EU for Protecting Vaccine Profits', *EU Observer*, 18 February 2022.
 14. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', *Marxists.org*. <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>> [accessed 8 December 2023].

15. Annamaria Simonazzi and Teresa Barbieri, 'The Middle Class in Italy: Reshuffling, Erosion, Polarization', in *Europe's Disappearing Middle Class?* ed. by Daniel Vaughan-Whitehead (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2016), p. 361.
16. Simonazzi and Barbieri note that 'after a sudden jump in the early 1990s, inequality and poverty measures show a substantial stagnation that contrasts with the widely shared sentiment of deteriorating economic conditions, increasing insecurity and vulnerability pervading large parts of the middle class' (ibid.).
17. Streeck argues that 'the conversion of the European Union into a vehicle for the liberalization of European capitalism' is facilitated by a dual process comprising 'rapidly advancing liberation of the economy from democracy and the separation of democracy from the governance of the economy, intended to enshrine the institutional hegemony of market justice over social justice'. Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 101.
18. Michael Wilkinson, *Authoritarian Liberalism and the Transformation of Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 3.
19. Ibid.
20. Cozzolino, p. 347, writes: 'the reconfiguration of the state in the neoliberal era should be seen as an incremental process, punctuated intermittently by capitalist crises. With respect to the Italian case, the 1992–93 and 2008–11 junctures proved to be key windows of opportunity to enhance a "market"-like rule and government's overall power. Both these junctures presented similar dynamics marked by fiscal crisis and emergency, as well as political uncertainty. The sense of emergency was invoked to legitimize further institutional restrictions on the possibilities for political accountability and for the pursuit of goals linked to alternative social and political programmes. Moreover, the data demonstrate that the use of emergency legislation to enact neoliberal reforms was equally supported by the centre-right and the centre-left, thus dramatically restricting the possibility for Italian voters to opt for a real alternative.'
21. This mutual dependence is evident in the fact that Meloni's first official foreign visit was to Ursula von der Leyen, a tactical decision designed to assure markets that whatever civil liberties her government might infringe upon in the future, business would continue as usual. Italy's large national debt coupled with its reliance upon the EU's COVID stimulus packages no doubt prompted Meloni's decision. Von der Leyen instead has been seemingly content to follow Meloni's lead by pursuing increasingly draconian migration policies. See 'EU States Expressed "Incomprehension" at Tunisia Migration Pact, Says Borrell', *The Guardian*, 18 September 2023.
22. Italy is by no means an outlier in the EU, as the rise of self-described illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland demonstrates. In the Italian context, however, I use the verb 'bury' advisedly, for the post-war rush to establish the First Republic ensured that the ghosts of fascism were never properly exorcised.
23. Gentili, p. 73.
24. Peter Spiegel, 'How the Euro Was Saved', *Financial Times*, 11 May 2014.
25. Monti stated that '[n]ot a single Italian ... has chosen me except for the President of the Republic. I feel the importance of this task as we have to impose, without the citizens asking for it, unpopular measures'. Quoted by Cozzolino, p. 336.
26. Ibid.
27. While it is true that technically all Presidenti del Consiglio dei Ministri are not directly elected by voters but instead receive their role from the president as head of state, Draghi, like Monti before him, was not even an elected member of parliament when promoted to prime minister. Monti's path to power was facilitated not by voters but by then President Giorgio Napolitano, who appointed him a senator for life on 9 November 2011, before appointing him prime minister three days later. When he did run for election two years later, Monti's coalition could only muster 10% of the popular vote. Draghi, meanwhile, had retired from the ECB and was a private citizen when Mattarella invited him to form a government.

28. These reforms would look familiar, with Draghi ushering 'in policies favoring businesses, including tax cuts to the rich'. See Paolo Gerbaudo, 'The Rise of the Technocrats Has Pushed Italian Democracy Deeper into Crisis', *Jacobin*, 24 January 2022.
29. As Gentili, drawing upon David Harvey, writes: 'the resumption of the figure of the charismatic leader and the need for a strong state, is not a consequence of, nor an alternative to the "perfect crisis" of neoliberalism, but is part of it and one of its functions' (p. 84).
30. In interview with Silvia di Paola, Rohrwacher recalled a history teacher reading her high school class an article about a similar case that apparently took place. See Alice Rohrwacher: 'Il mio mondo contadino sulle orme di Olmi'. See Silvia Di Paola, 'Intervista alla regista du Lazzaro Felice, vincitore del Premio migliore sceneggiatura al 71 Festival di Cannes', *Sale Della Comunità*, 3 Feb 2022 <<https://www.saledellacomunita.it/alice-rohrwacher-il-mio-mondo-contadino-sulle-orme-di-olmi/>> [accessed 8 December 2023].
31. Amy Taubin, 'Festivals: Why Settle for Less?', *Film Comment*, July/August 2018.
32. Erika Balsom, 'Happy as Lazzaro Review: Alice Rohrwacher Holds a Holy Mirror to the Persistence of Injustice', *Sight & Sound*, May 2019.
33. Rohrwacher, in her interview with Schiefer, p. 2.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Gentili, p. 73.
36. This charge, as we will see, would become something of a theme. The landowners' outrage, though morally bankrupt, was economically understandable, given how lucrative (for them) the mezzadria system was. Mezzadria, which was most commonly deployed in the largely agricultural regions of Tuscany, Umbria and Marche, was so extensive that as recently as 1881, close to a quarter of the former's workforce were sharecroppers. See Annalisa Luporini and Bruno Parigi, 'Multi-Task Sharecropping Contracts: The Italian Mezzadria', *Economia*, 63.251 (1996), p. 447.
37. See Ilaria Favretto, *The Long Search for a Third Way: The British Labour Party and the Italian Left Since 1945* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2003).
38. The Italian social scientist Annalisa Murgia writes that the 'transformations affecting the world of work, are distinguishable in Italy by the proliferation, which began in the mid-1990s, of what has been defined as non-standard or "atypical" work — that is, any working situation which is neither dependent nor independent full-time employment. Studies of work in Italy refer to atypical work, flexibility, de-standardisation and "partial and selective deregulation" See Annalisa Murgia, 'Representations of Precarity in Italy', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 7.1 (2013), 48–63 (p. 50).
39. Daniel Witkin, 'A Giant Leap: An Interview with Alice Rohrwacher', *Reverse Shot*, 2 December 2018.
40. The establishment of the Second Republic was also a period in which Fratelli d'Italia's neo-fascist antecedents the MSI changed their name to Alleanza Nazionale and declared themselves 'post-fascist'.
41. Nicola visits the villagers each month to settle their accounts, but no matter how hard they work, or how much they produce, their debt to the Marchesa always increases.
42. Rohrwacher's scepticism about the role of the Catholic church in Italian society dates back to her debut film *Corpo celeste* (2011). While ambivalence remains in that film, however, here the church is depicted in an entirely negative light, most notably in *Lazzaro's* penultimate scene when the villagers are chased out of the church by a nun. The baroque interior of the church highlights the discrepancy between the nun's vow of poverty and the church's material wealth, while the ironic playing of Bach's 'Have Mercy on Me, Oh Lord' on the church organ underscores the institution's hypocrisy. Interestingly, the music follows Lazzaro out of the church, suggesting that while the institution might be rotten, the values it has abandoned remain salvageable. Following this thread, it is worth noting that a number of reviewers likened Lazzaro to Francis of Assisi, who disavowed material wealth to live a life of itinerant poverty (see, for example, Di Bianco).

43. For a detailed analysis of religion in *Lazzaro felice*, see Robert Interdonato, 'A Different Spirituality: On Lazzaro's Symbolic Potency in Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy as Lazzaro*', *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, 11.1 (2023), 145–61.
44. The success of this indoctrination is highlighted when Antonia (Agnese Graziani), the film's sometime narrator, tells Lazzaro about the fate of St Agatha, who was gruesomely tortured for rejecting the advances of the Roman proconsul Quintian, but crucially died a martyr and remained, like the plantation itself, unviolated.
45. An additional article could be written about Antonia's knowing looks throughout the film, with her character interpreted as Alice Rohrwacher's representative in the film. Alba Rohrwacher's presence lends additional credence to this potential reading.
46. In her excellent ecocritical review of *Lazzaro*, Elena Past singles this moment out as being emblematic of the film's deployment of 'queer ecological time', which disrupts the linearity of capitalist logics and instead 'gently exerts pressure on the temporal frames of history, nature, and cinema'. See Elena Past, 'Film Review: *Lazzaro felice* by Alice Rohrwacher', *gender/sexuality/Italy*, 6 (2019).
47. And, as many commentators charged, hoped to escape prosecution for alleged involvement in the scandal.
48. Alan Cowell, 'Italians Stage General Strike Against Cuts: Protests Also Call for Premier's Ouster', *New York Times*, 15 October 1994.
49. Technocratic governments headed by bankers are not a new phenomenon in Italy and their rise can be mapped directly onto increased European economic integration. Sociologist Marcello Musto notes that 'since the end of the First Republic in the early 1990s, there have been numerous governments with "technical" leadership or without political party representatives. These include the government of Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, previously governor of the Bank of Italy for fifteen years, from 1993 to 1994 (and subsequently elected to the office of president of Italy from 1999 to 2006); the government of Lamberto Dini, former director general of the Bank of Italy, after a long career at the International Monetary Fund, in 1995–96; and the government of Mario Monti, the former European Commissioner for Competition with previous relevant experience on the Rockefeller Group's Trilateral Commission, the Bilderberg Group steering committee, and as an international adviser to Goldman Sachs, from 2011 to 2013'. See Marcello Musto, 'The Rule of "Experts" Is Destroying Democracy', *Jacobin*, 25 July 2022.
50. Although Berlusconi did not share Thatcher's discipline in government, he admired her commitment to individualism. Thatcher in turn recognized a kindred spirit, and publicly backed Berlusconi's ultimately successful election campaign in 2001, stating that 'it is clear to me — and it is doubtless equally clear to his opponents — that his goals are very similar to those which the government which I led pursued in Britain. Mr Berlusconi grasps, as too many Europeans do not, that competition not bureaucracy must be the watchword of the new Europe.' See 'Thatcher Backs Italy's Berlusconi', *CNN*, 11 May, 2001. <<https://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/05/10/italy.berlusconi/index.html>> [accessed 8 December 2023].
51. In this, the shock therapy in question most obviously recalls Naomi Klein's conceptualization of the shock doctrine, which in neoliberal terms was battle tested by Thatcher's old friend Augusto Pinochet, the autocratic Chilean dictator who imposed both extreme neoliberalism (banning trade unions, privatizing public utilities and social security, removing protection for local industry) and extreme violence (disappearing, torturing, and murdering thousands of human beings) upon his own people. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf, 2007).
52. For a considered materialist analysis of how *Lazzaro* as a production engaged with scarcity and environmental degradation, see Lucia Della Fontana, p. 209, who argues that Rohrwacher's use of film stock ensures that a 'contiguity is thus created between the body of the film and real bodies', both of which are exposed and subject to decay.
53. The villagers' physical marginalization at the edge of society is evidence enough of this amnesia, but Rohrwacher emphasizes the point in the next scene, when Lazzaro and Antonia try to sell the Marchesa's cigarette holder to an indifferent member of the public.

The woman in question is mildly interested in the item as a novelty factor but is unwilling to meet Antonia's €50 asking price.

54. I use 'dwelling' advisedly, for they live in what appears to be a converted cooling tower. The makeshift nature of their home emphasizes their precarity, as does the three-wheel van that they drive: a vehicle that is seemingly forever on the verge of tipping over.
55. The broadcasting station is the Milan-based local channel Lombardia TV, calling to mind the origins of Berlusconi's media empire, which began humbly with the establishment of TeleMilano.
56. Benjamin.
57. Ibid. (original emphasis).
58. Ibid. (original emphasis).
59. Ibid.

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