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«*Neorealismo* with a satirical outlook»:
Alberto Sordi (1920-2003) and the stardom of
the *commedia all'italiana* genre

Abstract

The Italian cinematic genre known as *commedia all'italiana* consisted of a wave of realist and satirical comedies depicting Italian society between the mid 1950s and the late 1970s. Many of the genre's filmmakers have pointed out in interviews how their practice was informed by the post-war *neorealismo* of directors such as Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini. However, the alleged relationship between these two cinematic forms poses a series of problems, one of these being that *neorealismo* is widely associated with the use of non-professional actors, while *commedia all'italiana* was characterised by the presence of immensely popular stars. This article will analyse this aspect of the *neorealismo-commedia* relationship through a case study of the stardom of Roman actor Alberto Sordi (1920-2003), one of the most popular *commedia all'italiana* stars.

Introduction

Many filmmakers of the popular Italian cinematic genre known as *commedia all'italiana*¹ referred to the post-war neorealist cinematic practice as an inspiration for their realist and satirical depiction of Ital-

¹ This expression derived from the success of Pietro Germi's 1961 comedy *Divorzio all'italiana* and in English the genre is referred to as *comedy, Italian style*. Before the release of Germi's film, these comedies were commonly referred to in Italy as *commedie di costume*, literally meaning *comedies of manners*.

ian society during and after the period of the Economic Miracle² and addressed the notion of a continuity between the dramatic films directed by Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini in the post-war period and the wave of comedic films they were involved in producing. For example, director Marco Ferreri is quoted by Enrico Giacovelli³ stating: «The *commedia* [*all'italiana*] is *neorealismo* revisited and modified in order to make people go to the movies»⁴, while screenwriter Rodolfo Sonogo addressed two post-war neorealist films directed by Roberto Rossellini in these terms: «*Roma, città aperta* (1945), the first film of *neorealismo*, and *Paisà* (1946) can be considered as the matrixes of *commedia all'italiana*»⁵. Such claims are validated by actual instances of continuity between the two cinematic forms; Vittorio De Sica himself directed two *commedie all'italiana* in the early 1960s, namely *Il giudizio universale* (1961) and *Il boom* (1963) and directors such as Luigi Zampa and Pietro Germi, who were considered 'minor' neorealists of the post-war period, directed acclaimed *commedie* such as, respectively, *Il medico della mutua* (Zampa, 1968) and *Divorzio all'italiana* (Germi,

² Even though the majority of *commedie all'italiana* were set during the Economic Miracle, historically the genre is considered to begin in 1958 with the release of Mario Monicelli's *I soliti ignoti*, thus some years later the beginning of the Miracle in the early 1950s. Likewise, *commedia all'italiana* scholar Enrico Giacovelli has identified the late 1970s as the period in which the last examples of this genre were produced, thus when the Economic Miracle phenomenon had been long over. Enrico Giacovelli, *La commedia all'italiana*, Rome, 1985, Gremese, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴For the purpose of immediacy of reading and continuity within the text, all of the quotes from sources in Italian will appear in English in the main body of the article as translated by me. The original quotes in Italian will appear in the footnotes, before their reference. In this instance, Ferreri's original statement was: «La *commedia* è il *neorealismo* riveduto e corretto per mandare la gente al cinema».

⁵ «*Roma città aperta*, il primo film del *neorealismo*, e *Paisà* possono essere considerate come le matrici della *commedia all'italiana*». Pietro Pintus (a cura di), *Commedia all'italiana. Parlano i protagonisti*, Gangemi, Rome, 1985, p. 182. I refer the reader to this volume, which is a collection of interviews with *commedia all'italiana* filmmakers, for a broader range of statements regarding the filmmakers opinion of the relationship between *neorealismo* and their comedic practice.

1961). If Rossellini was not ever involved in directing a proper *commedia all'italiana* himself, the screenwriters of his early neorealist films, Sergio Amidei and Federico Fellini, both had connections with this genre. The former, according to *commedia* screenwriter Agenore Incrocci, was the first one to transpose in a comedic context «all of the structural and formal principles of neorealist cinema»⁶ with his screenplay for Luciano Emmer's *Domenica d'Agosto* (1950) and became a regular screenwriter of comedies in the late 1960s⁷, while the latter directed in 1953 the film *I vitelloni*, which greatly inspired all of the *commedia* filmmakers and has been defined by Giacovelli as a «*commedia all'italiana ante-litteram*»⁸.

Despite this evidence the notion of a *neorealismo-commedia all'italiana* relationship poses some critical problems, which to date have been under-studied despite the large quantity of work published on post-war neorealist filmmaking and the re-emergence of academic interest in Italian popular cinematic forms⁹. On the one hand, *neorealismo* was immediately critically acclaimed both in Italy and internationally and is widely considered to have initiated 'modern' cinema, even though it was not particularly successful in commercial terms among the Italian audiences at the time; on the other hand, *commedie*

⁶ «[Amidei transpose in un contesto comico] tutti i principi strutturali e formali del cinema neorealista». Pietro Pintus (a cura di), *Commedia all'italiana*, cit., p.16.

⁷ In fact Amidei substituted Rodolfo Sonego in the position of habitual writing partner for the *commedia all'italiana* star Alberto Sordi, who is the main subject of this article, and collaborated to the writing of comedy films such as the aforementioned Luigi Zampa directed *Il medico della mutua*.

⁸ Enrico Giacovelli, *La Commedia all'italiana*, cit., p. 37.

⁹ As late as 2008 Roberto Ellero wrote that: «the analysis regarding elements of continuity between *neorealismo* and *commedia all'italiana*, the most important and accomplished expression of our national genre production, remains unexplored». (In the original: «largamente inesplorata [...] rimane l'analisi intorno agli elementi di continuità del *neorealismo* nella massima e più compiuta espressione di genere della produzione nazionale, la *commedia all'italiana*».) Roberto Ellero, "Il neorealismo che non passa (di moda)" in *Ripensare il neorealismo. Cinema, letteratura, mondo*, Antonio Vitti (a cura di), Metauro, Pesaro, 2008, pp. 121-126, pp. 124-125.

all'italiana were reviled by Italian critics at the height of this genre's production, but were immensely successful among the popular audiences and thus extremely profitable¹⁰. Similarly, the post-war neorealist depiction of the Resistance and of the aftermath of World War Two posed the lower classes at the centre of the screen, while *commedia all'italiana* was associated with the middle-classes as the protagonists of the fast paced modernization of the country in the Economic Miracle period, the extreme poverty seen in neorealist films such as Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) or *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) seeming light years removed in less than a decade. Neorealist cinema was constantly referred to as a socially 'engaged' type of filmmaking, while *commedia all'italiana* was mainly considered to solely have an entertaining agenda. Several aspects of the relationship between these two forms are the object of my current research. Here, however, I will discuss this problematic facet of it: *neorealismo* is widely associated with the use of non-professional actors in films such as the aforementioned *Ladri di biciclette*, while the *commedia all'italiana* genre was characterised by a recognised and extremely popular star system. As Ferreri stated some aspects of the neorealist practice had to be «revisited and modified in order to make people go to the movies», in order to gain that popularity that reasons of economic feasibility made necessary and we can easily assume that the use of popular comedians was one of these alterations of the original neorealist template that the *commedia all'italiana* genre accepted in this sense. However, if the relationship between the two cinematic forms is as close and as direct as the *commedia* filmmakers maintain it was, certainly the stardom developed in the context of this comedic genre must have had attributes which were derived from its

¹⁰ The reputation of *commedia all'italiana* in the critical arena changed in the late 1970s and early 1980s as it started to be championed by French critics, most importantly by Jean A. Gili who wrote the first volume dedicated to the genre in a foreign language: Jean A. Gili, *La comédie italienne*, Henri Veyrier, Paris, 1983.

post-war ancestor. In order to verify this notion, I shall discuss the star image and career of Roman actor Alberto Sordi (1920-2003).

I have chosen Sordi as the subject of this case study for a number of different reasons. Firstly, his involvement in over a hundred Italian comedic films meant that his popularity among the Italian audiences surpassed those of Ugo Tognazzi, Vittorio Gassman and Nino Manfredi, the other *commedia all'italiana* stars. Secondly, his early involvement in a series of satires in the mid 1950s, such as Franco Rossi's *Il seduttore* (1954) and Antonio Pietrangeli's *Lo scapolo* (1955) established the comedic social type that the other performers of the genre were going to capture on screen¹¹, to the point that Giacobelli makes this distinction:

The others *were involved in commedia all'italiana*, he was *commedia all'italiana* [my emphasis]. His personal history is the very history of the genre, a fundamental document to understand Italian society and history in the 20th century. Without Gassman *commedia all'italiana* would have been less lively, without Manfredi less passionate, without Tognazzi less malicious. But without him it would have probably never existed¹².

Additionally, Sordi's involvement during the same period in a number of *farse* comedies, a less realist Italian comedic form which followed the mechanisms of slapstick gags, is in apparent contradiction with the notion of his star image being related with *neorealismo*. Final-

¹¹ Regarding the notion of social type in the context of stardom Richard Dyer writes that «it is a shared, recognisable, easily grasped image of how people are in society. [...] The star both fulfils/incarnates the type and, by virtue of her/his idiosyncrasies, individuates it». Richard Dyer, *Stars*, British Film Institute Publishing, London, p. 47.

¹² «Gli altri hanno fatto la *commedia all'italiana*; lui è stato la *commedia all'italiana*. La sua storia è la storia stessa del genere, un documento fondamentale per capire la storia e la società italiana del ventesimo secolo. Senza Gassman la *commedia all'italiana* sarebbe stata più smorta, senza Manfredi più distaccata, senza Tognazzi meno maliziosa. Ma senza di lui probabilmente non sarebbe esistita». Enrico Giacobelli, *La commedia all'italiana*, cit., pp. 263-264.

ly, Sordi himself was outspoken in relating the *commedia* genre to the post-war neorealist wave, as he stated:

Our aim was that of resuming *neorealismo* with a satirical outlook. De Sica and Rossellini's films [of the post-war period] put on screen a poor Italy struggling for survival. We, after some years, gathered their heritage to put on screen instead the middle class Italy that was changing, that wanted to make it big, to succeed, and we did it our way: being inspired by reality, just like the neorealist maestros, but deforming it by isolating its negative aspects, because only that which has a negative connotation is comedic¹³.

Furthermore, Sordi identified this neorealist heritage as the element which distinguished *commedia all'italiana* from other Italian comedic forms by arguing that:

Commedia all'italiana is a more recent definition. When I started working there was no such thing. There was the absolutely 'serious' film or the absolutely comedic one, that of Tognazzi and Vianello, of Macario¹⁴... I wanted to do the neorealist film with a comedic tone, not the comedic film. Nobody knew that it would have become known as *commedia all'italiana*¹⁵.

¹³ «Il nostro scopo era quello di riprendere il *neorealismo* a sfondo satirico. I film di De Sica e Rossellini raccontavano l'Italia povera che lottava per la sopravvivenza; noi, a distanza di qualche anno, raccogliemmo la loro eredità per raccontare però l'Italia borghese che cambiava, che voleva arrivare, che cercava di contare, e lo facemmo alla nostra maniera: ispirandoci sì alla realtà, come i maestri del *neorealismo*, ma deformandola a scopo satirico e isolandone gli aspetti negativi, perché soltanto il negativo è comico». Enrico Giacobelli, *Un italiano a Roma. La vita, i successi, le passioni di Alberto Sordi*, Lindau, Turin, 2003, p. 110.

¹⁴ Even though Sordi mentions Tognazzi, who in fact became another *commedia all'italiana* star, he is here referring to a number of early *farse* comedies that the Lombard comedian acted in before his involvement in the *commedia* genre in partnership with Raimondo Vianello, whom he worked with also in the variety television show *Un, due, tre*.

¹⁵ «*Commedia all'italiana* è una definizione odierna. Quando cominciai a lavorare, non si chiamava così. Esisteva il film assolutamente serio o del tutto comico, quello di Tognazzi e Vianello, di Macario... Io volevo fare il cinema neorealistico con una notazione comica, non il film comico. Nessuno pensava, poi, che si sarebbe

We can deduce from this quote that Sordi perceived that his involvement in *commedia all'italiana* had more in common with *neorealismo* than with other forms of Italian comedic cinema and also that he attributed to his own practice as much importance as Giacobelli did when stating that Sordi 'was' *commedia all'italiana*¹⁶.

Between slapstick and satire: Sordi's contradictory early years

Is Sordi's claim accurate and, if so, which aspects of his stardom determined the achievement of a «*neorealismo* with a satirical outlook»? After a number of years learning and refining the comedic craft in the stage variety shows of *avanspettacolo*, a common practice shared in the years immediately before and after the war by both slapstick comedians such as Totò and actors involved in *neorealismo* such as Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani, Sordi's early post-war involvement in the cinema seems to confirm that he was interested in making realist cinema all along; his voice can be heard dubbing a non-professional actor cast as a second hand market vendor in De Sica's seminal neorealist film *Ladri di biciclette* and his first role as a protagonist was in a film produced by De Sica and by screenwriter and neorealist theorist Cesare Zavattini¹⁷. Even though the resulting film, entitled *Mamma mia che impressione!*

chiamato *commedia all'italiana*». Pietro Pintus (a cura di), *Commedia all'italiana. Parlano i protagonisti*, cit., pp.191-192.

¹⁶ Even though Sordi started directing too in 1966 with *Fumo di Londra* I do not wish to discuss the realist merits of the films he directed here, as I intend to solely focus on the merits of his stardom and the problems the notion of popular stars in *commedia all'italiana* raises in terms of the genre's relationship with *neorealismo*. However, the fact that he started directing is also perfectly representative of the entire stardom of *commedia all'italiana* as other performers such as Ugo Tognazzi, Nino Manfredi and Vittorio Gassman did the same.

¹⁷ In fact, Roberto Savarese is credited as the director of *Mamma mia che impressione*, but Sordi claimed that in fact De Sica directed every scene of the film. See Goffredo Fofi, *Alberto Sordi. L'Italia in bianco e nero*, Mondadori, Milan, pp. 78-83.

(1951, directed by Roberto Savarese), did not achieve a particularly realist humour due to the fact that Sordi relied too much on the incessant repetition of punch lines that made the main character in the plot popular on his radio show but obviously did not translate well in the cinema medium, the fact that he was seeking De Sica's and Zavattini's collaboration at this point, in the years in which the two were making classic post-war neorealist films such as *Miracolo a Milano* is significant. Sordi's choice of character in the film, a parody of the members of the Christian Democrat intransigent boy-scout group Azione Cattolica, also had direct socio-political connotations which were uncommon for Italian comedic films at the time¹⁸.

The thesis of a supposed realist agenda on Sordi's part is confirmed by his casting in two of the early films directed by Italian neorealist director Federico Fellini, *Lo sceicco bianco* (1952) and the aforementioned *I vitelloni* (1953)¹⁹. In fact, if these two films have been retrospectively identified as two *commedie all'italiana* before their time, it is probably because of his presence in them, in other words because of

¹⁸ In the same year, for instance, the *farsa* comedy *Totò e i re di Roma* (directed by Steno and Mario Monicelli), which touched on social issues such as unemployment albeit through an absolutely surreal storyline, had to be dramatically manipulated in the editing room in order to obtain the approval for distribution by the Christian Democrat government censorship board. In this respect, it is quite extraordinary that *Mamma mia che impressione!* was released at all, considering it was directly ridiculing an institution closely connected to the Christian Democrat party.

¹⁹ Fellini started working as a screenwriter in the early 1940s, penning dialectal comedies starring Aldo Fabrizi. He was first involved in post-war *neorealismo* as a screenwriter for Roberto Rossellini. Even though the majority of the films he directed is associated with 'art cinema', *Lo sceicco bianco* and *I vitelloni* are considered late neorealist films, while his following film *La strada* (1954) has been historically identified as the film which ends the neorealist wave, because of the debate that it sparked among critics at the time. Fellini considered casting Sordi for the role of Il Matto in *La strada*, but ultimately the part went to Richard Baseheart.

the casting of someone who was soon to become a *commedia* star in two films otherwise considered as examples of *neorealismo*²⁰.

If Sordi's association with both De Sica and Fellini validates his claim of pursuing «the neorealist film with a comedic tone», his casting in a number of *farse* before the *commedia all'italiana* genre emerged seemingly contradicts this notion, as this form relied on comedic mechanisms that diverged from realism and the imitation of social types, as Livi notes:

Comedic cinema [*of the time*], after all, was clearly separated from the serious one because it was bound to other very old rules: the protagonist had to provoke laughter mostly because of his unusual and funnily characterised face [...]; the plots did

²⁰ This notion of these two films being read as either neorealist if one puts more emphasis on Fellini or as *commedia* if one perceives them 'in light of' Sordi's presence raises the question of the relationship between stardom and authorship, which I shall briefly discuss. Richard Dyer wrote on the subject that: «star images and performance are also used by other authors. [...] This notion of the star and the director mutually bringing something out in each other informs much auteurist criticism. This approach does usually privilege the director over the star in their collaborative interaction». Richard Dyer, *Stars*, cit., p. 155. Whether one subscribes to an auteurist point of view and conceives the actor as something similar to a musical instrument played by the director or, instead, privileges the stars' input by conceiving directors as technicians who record performances given by actors while interpreting a written script, it can be agreed that, no matter to what extent the actor is overwhelmed or manipulated by the indications of the directors, in interpreting or following such directions the performer is left with a set of choices to be consciously or subconsciously made in accordance to his/her personality, talents and judgement. Having clarified this, I will discuss a number of character traits as results of Sordi's stardom and of his performances, in virtue of King's notion that «the actor is a re-presenter of signs in that he or she activates or deactivates via impersonation those aspects of the general cultural markers that he or she bears as a private individual for character portrayal». Barry King, *Articulating stardom*, in "Screen", XXVI, n° 5, 1985. pp. 27-50, p. 37. In this light, expressions used such as "Sordi's character" or "Sordi's approach", etc. should not be taken as statements of the Roman actor's supposed authorship over the director and the writers' creative inputs, but rather the discussion of the manifestations in the context of a given film, character or phase of his career of a number of tendencies which consistently characterised his re-presentation of signs over the arc of his entire career.

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not mirror reality, but were rather based on absurd situations which were dilated and repeated to provoke hilarity; [...] the comedic hero, most often, did not resemble the average man, but rather was liked and admired for his unique abilities²¹.

I will argue that his involvement in this slapstick form of comedic cinema was merely instrumental to the acceptance on the part of the public of his following realist type. Before I do so, however, it is necessary to re-contextualise the impact of the use of non-professional actors associated with post-war *neorealismo*.

The neorealist «amalgam» and the emergence of an «unsettling relation to the star»

The discrepancy between the use of non-professionals in the original form of *neorealismo* and the massive popularity that Sordi and the other *commedia all'italiana* stars gained in the 1960s is apparently overwhelming. The association of post-war *neorealismo* with non-professionals actors is, however, as Medici points out, statistically incorrect:

As far as the use of non-professional actors goes, even in this case it is necessary to diversify the critical analysis from the neorealist logo. In a survey promoted by *Cinema nuovo* in 1955, De Sica himself counted only ten or so neorealist films characterized by this practice over the course of ten years²².

²¹ «Il cinema comico, d'altro canto, si distingueva nettamente da quello serio perché era basato su altre vecchissime regole: il protagonista doveva suscitare il riso soprattutto per la sua faccia strana, buffamente caratterizzata [...]; la trama non rispecchiava la realtà, ma era basata su situazioni assurde, dilatate e insistite fino a far scoppiare l'ilarità [...]; l'eroe comico, per di più, non assomigliava all'uomo medio, ma anzi piaceva e suscitava ammirazione proprio per le sue capacità diversissime». Grazia Livi, *Alberto Sordi*, Longanesi, Milan, 1967, p. 95.

²² «Quanto all'attore non professionista, anche in questo caso è opportuno dislocare il discorso critico dal logo neorealista. In un bilancio promosso da *Cinema nuovo* nel 1955, lo stesso De Sica contava in dieci anni solo una decina di film neorealisti caratterizzati da questa scelta». Antonio Medici, *Neorealismo.il movimento*

The international critical success of films featuring non-professionals such as De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) contributed to a 'logo', a formula that scholars came to identify with the neorealist practice. They did so despite the fact that there never was such a thing as a neorealist manifesto dictating the use of non-professionals and that this type of casting was not so widespread. The apparent discrepancy between this notion and the star system of *commedia all'italiana* does not subsist if measured in purely quantitative terms. *Roma, città aperta*, the film which initiated the neorealist wave, featured, after all, Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani, two of the most popular performers at the time. Despite the fact that the use of non-professional actors in *neorealismo* was quite limited, post-war neorealist films informed the stardom of the *commedia* in different terms, as I shall argue.

The French critic André Bazin noted that, rather than solely using non-professional actors too frequently, more often neorealist films tended to cast both professionals and non-professionals at the same time. He defined this practice as 'amalgam'.

[...] the law that I propose to call the amalgam. It is not the absence of professional actors that is, historically, the hallmark of social realism nor of the Italian film. Rather, it is specifically the rejection of the star concept and the casual mixing of professionals and of those who just act occasionally. It is important to avoid casting the professional in the role for which he is known. The public should not be burned with any preconceptions²³.

Although the full «rejection of the star concept» that Bazin referred to has later been disproved by studies such as Landy's *Stardom, Italian*

che ha cambiato la storia del cinema, analizzato, fotogrammi alla mano, nei suoi procedimenti tecnico-formali, Dino Audino Editore, Rome, 2008, p. 14.

²³ André Bazin, *What is cinema? Vol. II. Essays Selected and Translated by Hugh Gray*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, pp. 22-25.

*style*²⁴ and Bazin himself noted that «nothing can prevent it evolving to the point at which it reintroduces the aesthetic dilemma it originally solved – that between the enslavement of the star and the documentary without actors²⁵», it is important to note that in Bazin's analysis the amalgam is tightly connected to subverting the audience's expectation of a character previously portrayed by a certain actor. If in the case of the occasional use of non-professionals the public could not be overwhelmed by a preconceived idea of which role to expect from a given performer, the same effect could certainly be achieved in the case of a professional, even a well-known performer being cast in a type that subverted the preconceptions established in previous films. This was certainly the case of the aforementioned casting of Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani in Rossellini's first neorealist film, the two being popular among the Italian audiences for comedic roles in the early 1940s and being unexpectedly cast in two very tragic roles, both of their characters dying on screen in a dramatic depiction of Partisan martyrdom.

Discussing the neorealist contribution to the emergence of a new type of stardom in the post-war period, Marcia Landy states:

In blurring lines between the everyday and the exceptional, the ceremonial and the banal, the real and the imaginary, and the physical and the mental, *neorealism* was instrumental in giving rise to a popular cinema where the spectator is invited to play a critical role and offered a different, even unsettling relation to the star²⁶.

This statement conflicts with Livi's quote regarding the «very old rules» preceding the advent of *neorealismo* that informed the humour of the *farse* and the stardom of the comedian in that popular form which was still very popular throughout the 1950s. The comedies of the

²⁴ Landy, M., *Stardom, Italian Style*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2008, p. 91.

²⁵ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol. II*, cit., pp. 22-25.

²⁶ Marcia Landy, *Stardom, Italian Style*, cit., p. 128.

neorealismo rosa wave, an intermediate comedic form between *neorealismo* and *commedia all'italiana*, also relied on classic relations between the audience and the star. Even though they adopted from *neorealismo* a shift in terms of the class embodied by the stars from the aristocratic fantasy of the Fascist period to the *popolana* of the post-war context²⁷, the sentimental comedies of *neorealismo rosa* encouraged the spectator to hope and fear in favour of the happy ending resolution of the plot the stars were entangled in, not differing from the Classic Hollywood model nor the bourgeois comedies of the Fascist era labelled '*telefoni bianchi*' in this respect²⁸. In light of this distinction, one should re-

²⁷ As noted by Réka Buckley, who writes: «They [*Silvana Pampanini, Silvana Mangano, Lucia Bosè, Gina Lollobrigida*] often played young *popolana* (peasant-type) women. This was quite a contrast to the so-called 'white telephone' films of the Fascist period, where the actresses usually played bourgeois, or lower middle-class women. It was also different to the roles performed by women in neorealist cinema. Here, women often offered a picture of misery and a sense of hopelessness, as was the case with Clara Calamai in Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* [*Obsession*] (1943) and Anna Magnani in Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* [*Rome Open City*] (1945). The characters portrayed by the new actresses were women who projected a sense of hope for a new and more positive future for the post-war nation». Reka Buckley, *Glamour and the Italian Female Film Stars of the 1950s* in "Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television", XXVIII, n° 3, pp. 267-298, pp. 270-271. The hope and positivity projected by the *neorealismo rosa* stars in comparison to the signs produced by their post-war *neorealismo* counterparts noted here by Buckley reflects the fact that, unlike the original neorealist ones, such comedies used the stars as vehicles of conventionality.

²⁸ The casting of Vittorio De Sica in the role of the *Carabinieri* marshal protagonist of Comencini's *Pane, amore e fantasia* (1953), the most famous example of *neorealismo rosa*, is an indicator of the influence that pre-neorealist comedies had on this comedic form, as Millicent Marcus pointed out in her analysis of the film: «De Sica's presence in the film works to undermine Comencini's realist aspirations in yet another way. When Zavattini articulated the neorealist prohibition against the casting of professionals [...] he did so not only because amateurs turn in a less contrived, more credible performance, but also because professional recitations are necessarily contaminated in the public mind by the memory of characters played by the same actors in the past. This is surely the case with Vittorio De Sica's Carotenuto who is, in many ways, a middle-aged version of the young ladies' man who graced so many of Mario Camerini's 1930s sentimental comedies». Millicent Mar-

contextualise Landy's statement and gather that not all of the comedic forms of popular cinema which emerged after the wave of post-war *neorealismo* were informed by this new «unsettling relation to the star», but rather only *commedia all'italiana* might have been. In verifying Sordi's claim of having successfully pursued «*neorealismo* with a satirical outlook», I shall thus demonstrate that his star image in this genre was characterised both by the subversion of the audiences' expectations pointed out by Bazin as the central innovation introduced by the neorealist «amalgam» and by «the unsettling relation» between star and public which, according to Landy, *neorealismo* gave rise to. In doing so, I shall also argue that his apparently contradictory involvement in *farse* comedies in the mid 1950s was necessary for this peculiar star image to be accepted by the general public.

Strategies of audience (dis)orientation: Sordi's negative type in Un americano a Roma and Il giudizio universale

The character of Nando Mericoni in Steno's 1954 *farsa* comedy *Un americano a Roma* is certainly one of Sordi's most popular roles and the film is one of the most successful films of this comedic form he was ever involved in. There is no doubt that the film does not have the ambition of having any particular realist merits, as an omniscient narrator announces in the first few seconds of the film that we are going to witness a farcical spectacle. However, there are in it some elements of continuity with *neorealismo* that deserve to be pointed out in the context of this argument.

Eight years after Rossellini's post-war neorealist film *Paisà*, Sordi's Nando Mericoni shows how the incomprehension between Italian

cus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1986, p. 129.

people and Americans documented in the neorealist piece was not yet resolved in the mid 1950s. Despite the Marshall plan and the intense political and economical alliance between liberated Italy and the U.S. at the time, Nando's perception of Americanism is distorted by the heroic myths promoted by Hollywood. He is incapable of understanding the Americans visiting Rome or of relating to them, namely because he slurs in an in-between lingo of Roman dialect interrupted by the occasional and out of context American expression, but also because in real life American people never meet his cinema-informed expectations. *Neorealismo* previously challenged the Classic Hollywood formula through its means of expression. While being an example of slapstick humour, *Un americano a Roma*, at the same time, satirically ridiculed the persistence of the American film clichés in the post-neorealist cinematic landscape. In fact, there is an explicit reference to Rossellini in the film, as Nando interrupts the shooting of a television interview to a famous Italian director named Verdolini (played by Ignazio Leone), who is married to a Swedish Hollywood star named Astrid (played by a very young Ursula Andress, an obvious reference to Rossellini's relationship with Ingrid Bergman). This reference to *neorealismo* has surprisingly been rarely mentioned in the existing criticism of the film, even though it raises a number of interesting issues with apparent simplicity by presenting us with a representation of one of the major artists of the cinema medium being confronted with the newborn competition constituted by television so early in Italian history and also by documenting the star status acquired by neorealist directors themselves at this stage.

This film occupies a central positioning in Sordi's career, as the popularity of Nando Mericoni's character built up on the momentum initiated by the success of *I vitelloni* and established the Roman actor as one of the most important comedians of his generation. In fact, his peculiar approach to humour, that of embodying cowardly and opportunistic traits he recognised in the Italian middle class man, initially alien-

ated the public when displayed in the realist context of *Lo sceicco bianco*, but, transposed in the more familiar context of the *farse* won the public over sufficiently so that in the upcoming years Sordi afforded to increasingly accentuate the socially negative traits of his type without losing its favour²⁹.

An analysis of Sordi's acting practice in *Il giudizio universale*, the 1961 *commedia all'italiana* directed by Vittorio De Sica which marked a second wave of collaborations between the star and the neorealist director ten years after *Mamma mia che impressione!*, shows how the Roman actor successfully used the popularity of Nando Mericoni's *farsa* antics as an element to negotiate his satirical and realist agenda with the public. His character in this film is, arguably, one of the most despicable he ever played and is a clear cut example of the «unsettling relation» he at this point afforded to establish with the audience.

The film narrates a series of intertwined episodes set in Naples, as the city is taken over by chaos when a voice from the sky announces that the Last Judgement of humanity is set to take place on that day at 6pm. Sordi plays an employee of a child adoption service operating on the edge of legality. He is commissioned by wealthy American families to find in the slums of Naples bankrupted parents willing to give up one of their many children in exchange for compensation. In his first scene Sordi's character publicly declares that he does not believe in the announcement of the judgement. He showcases his professionalism despite the exceptional circumstances by adopting formal Italian to highlight his detachment from the heartbroken families that surround him: «Ladies and gentlemen, I will start by saying that as a principle I do not believe in this prank of the Last Judgement!»³⁰ – he says with a matter

²⁹ Apparently the public found Sordi's cynical character of the White Sheik in Fellini's film so unlikable that the producers forced the director to remove Sordi's name from the promotional poster for *I vitelloni*.

³⁰ «Signori, vi dico subito che, per principio, io non credo a questo stupido scherzo del giudizio universale. Sò solo che i bambini devono partire per l'America e io li devo immatricolare!»

of fact, almost military enunciation. As a father slaps his son who is crying at the prospect of leaving, Sordi introduces a Roman dialect expression: «No, no, no... Hey! No one gets hit here, for no reason whatsoever...»³¹. The adoption of colloquial vernacular to interrupt the abuse temporarily bridges the gap between the public and the character, who is now apparently reasonably behaving and expressing himself like someone in the audience would. As soon as this process of complicity starts, however, Sordi reverts to his formal enunciation and unveils the reasons for the character's objection to violence: «The kid was purchased healthy and I must deliver him in that condition»³². As he finds out that one of the selected children is missing, the exploiter's true feelings for the unfortunate, uneducated Neapolitan families are revealed: «I understand that you people come from the slums» – he says – «but this is no reason for lacking in professionalism when it comes to business and for always giving the foreigner a reason to form a poor opinion!»³³. This affirmation does not simply imply that the child-salesman is judgemental towards those who are weaker than him despite is morally questionable profession. It also reveals that, probably motivated by hidden racist beliefs, blames this sentimental unprofessionalism of the Neapolitans for the low opinion foreigners have of all Italians.

How can the public sustain such an offensive, spiteful behaviour, or even find it entertaining? As he exits the scene to embark on a quest to find the missing child, Sordi's character gives instructions to his American assistant in Nando Mericoni's made-up *trasteverino* English. It is through this promise of theatrics associated with his previously established character, that Sordi renews the complicity between the audi-

³¹ «No, no, no! Ahò! Qui non se mena. Non se mena pe' nessuna ragione...»

³² «...Il bambino è stato acquistato sano e sano io lo devo consegnare al destinatario».

³³ «Capisco che siete gente che venite dal basso ma non per questo non si può essere seri e non gettare sempre il discredito in pasto allo straniero!»

ence and his present monstrous impersonation³⁴. Later in the film, the city of Naples is flooded by the wrath of God. In these catastrophic circumstances Sordi's child-salesman eventually promises to find a more morally acceptable job. However, he never does fully repent for his actions though and instead depicts himself as a victim of an ill-devised scheme: «Why do you keep blaming me?» – he asks a woman who is accusing him of being the devil. His defence is: «You cannot judge, because someone like you cannot understand! So I expect to address someone who can. Socially speaking, my profession is part of the system of things, I did not come up with it!»³⁵. At the end of the film, once the flood is over and the city of Naples celebrates, Sordi's character returns to his activity and approaches a woman holding two children. He weighs them as one would do with groceries and feeds them sweets. The comedic resolution is not achieved by the slapstick theatrics of the *farsa*, which, despite his allusions to *Un americano a Roma*, are never fully delivered by Sordi in this film. In his study of stardom, Richard Dyer theorised that in classic Hollywood cinema and more in general in commercial filmmaking

the four categories of star/audience relationship that emerge in this classification are thus: -*Emotional affinity*. This is the weakest category and 'probably' the most common. [...] - *Self-identification*. [...] - *Imitation*. This is apparently commonest among the young and takes the star/audience relationship beyond cinema-going [...] - *Projection*³⁶.

³⁴ Although I do not intend to discuss the notion of authorship here but rather just this succession of behaviours attributed to the character as manifestations of the signs Sordi is imposing on characters usually conceived by someone else, it is significant that in this case De Sica and Zavattini have credited Sordi for the idea of the child-salesman character, inspired by a newspaper article.

³⁵ «Perché vi accanite contro di me? Voi non potete giudicare perchè non capite! Mi appello perciò a chi di dovere. Socialmente parlando, il mio mestiere rientra nel quadro generale, non l'ho inventato io!»

³⁶ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, cit., p. 18.

However, in *Il giudizio universale* and the other *commedie all'italiana* in which Sordi embodied this negative type, the fulfilment of a classic redemptive narrative arc, typical of Hollywood stardom strategies, is rejected causing all of these four categories of classification to be inapplicable. In this sense *commedia all'italiana* is characterised by an «unsettling relation» between public and star. It is the re-institution of a false sense of superiority that ultimately signifies the journey on which Sordi has taken the audience. Once the film is over, the public's judgemental attitude towards the despicable character is reinstated; though the entertainment that Sordi has provided in depicting him, by using mannerisms he has observed in the common people that eventually form his audience, adds a layer of unsettling complicity between the spectator and the representation on the screen.

As I have said, *Il giudizio universale* is a very extreme example of Sordi's practice; his characters have not always been so explicitly evil and he therefore did not have to refer so often to open theatrics to have the audience accept them. As he progressively achieved the status of national icon during the course of his career, he was able to dismiss completely the theatrics of the *farsa* on the silver screen³⁷. Originally, though, Sordi managed to make acceptable the cynicism that characterizes his socially negative type through balancing the realistic representation of spiteful behaviour with humorous nods to the public.

Sordi's subversion of the audiences' expectations as a template for the stardom of the commedia all'italiana genre

The infantilism, opportunism, cowardliness and meanness of the comedic protagonist were the distinctive innovations that Sordi brought to Italian comedy and they were only accepted after his success in *farse* such as *Un giorno in pretura* and *Un americano a Roma*. Once

³⁷ He did however revert back to slapstick humour in television appearances for reasons that I shall discuss later.

they were transposed from the *farse* to a realist setting through Sordi's negative type of the 'average Italian' in films written by Rodolfo Sonogo such as *Lo scapolo*, these traits came to define the stardom of all of the *commedia all'italiana* performers who benefitted from Sordi's intuition, as director Mario Monicelli noted:

The new comedians [*of the commedia all'italiana genre*] subvert this condition, which now becomes aggressive. It is now their overwhelming of others that provokes laughter. The inadequacy [*of the characters*] is not paired with bad luck, but rather with cowardly behaviour, meanness and, at times, simply with stupidity. Arrogant with the weak and deferential with the powerful, the new figure of the comedian surprises the audience, does not allow it to be naive anymore. [...] In this respect, Sordi was so great in capturing the soul of Italians. [...] Sordi unveiled their hidden inner abjectness, hypocrisy, self involvement, to the point of embodying unlikeable, if not odious characters. It was thus very hard for him to be accepted by the public [*at first*]. Later, it became normal that the protagonist of *Il sorpasso* would be an unlikeable Gassman [*character*]. Totò, instead, could not have been despicable. He was a *maschera* ³⁸.

Thus, the '*cattiveria*' of Sordi's negative type revolutionised the landscape of Italian film comedy and created a gap with, on one side, the old school of Totò, Fabrizi and Macario and, on the other, the new approach devised by Sordi that eventually other performers like Vitto-

³⁸ «I nuovi comici ribaltano la condizione, che spesso diventa aggressiva. Adesso è la sopraffazione a suscitare la risata. L'inettitudine non è più accompagnata dalla sfortuna, ma si abbina alla viltà, alla turpitudine talvolta, o soltanto alla stupidità. Arrogante con i deboli e deferente con I potenti, la nuova figura del comico spiazzava lo spettatore e non gli permette più di essere ingenuo. In questo senso Sordi fu grandissimo nel cogliere l'anima dell'italiano. [...] Sordi svelò il suo retroscena di grettezza, ipocrisia, egoismo, fino a mettere in scena personaggi antipatici se non proprio odiosi. E infatti fu durissima farsi accettare dal pubblico. Poi divenne normale che il protagonista del *Sorpasso* fosse un Gassman antipaticissimo. Totò invece non poteva essere antipatico. Lui era una maschera». Sebastiano Mondadori, *La commedia umana. Conversazioni con Mario Monicelli*, Il Saggiatore, Milan, 2005, pp. 24-25.

rio Gassman benefitted from³⁹. Monicelli's reference to the *maschera* of Neapolitan comedian Totò signals how Sordi's comedic practice, in the long run, also derived from the Italian stage tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, just like the comedic characterisations featured in *farse*, *neorealismo rosa* and *neorealismo* itself did, but dismissed its more accentuated elements of slapstick humour and repetition which still informed the anarchic surrealist stardom of the previous generation of comedians⁴⁰.

If the establishment of Sordi's negative type of the average Italian represented at the same time the most stark example of the «unsettling relation» between public and star introduced by *neorealismo* in the context of comedic film production and a first instance of subversion of the audiences' expectations as theorised by Bazin, an unfulfilled expectation of slapstick antics in this case, could the realism of this type be undermined as the audiences came to be accustomed to it over time?

Even after the establishment of his realist negative type in the mid 1950s, Sordi progressively kept embodying new contradictory types in

³⁹ As previously noted, Mario Monicelli's *I soliti ignoti* (1958) has been pointed out by Italian film historians such as Enrico Giacovelli as the film that initiated *commedia all'italiana*, for a number of innovations. As regards to stardom, the film's merit is to have revealed Vittorio Gassman's comedic potential and thus offered Sordi competition in the depiction of the defects of the average Italian. This friendly rivalry was crucial to the success of the genre and was documented in an early Sixties television sketch within an Indro Montanelli program. In the sketch, Sordi is fighting with producer Dino De Laurentis because he has been asked to dance in a film. He does not want to appear as «a buffoon anymore», he says. As soon as he walks out of the stage-replica of De Laurentis' office, he hears the producer calling Vittorio Gassman on the phone to replace him. Sordi swings back in, displaying one of his famous parodies of American imported dance routines.

⁴⁰ With regards to the influence of the *commedia dell'arte* stage tradition in informing characters of post-war *neorealismo*, I refer the reader to David Bruni, *Roberto Rossellini. Roma città aperta*, Lindau, Turin, 2007. A reading of Sordi's stardom in reference to this tradition could be done, but here I am only interested Sordi's star image positioning in the *neorealismo-commedia* relationship.

order to keep subverting the preconceived notions of his star image that the public was developing. Sordi's involvement in *commedia all'italiana* can be divided in four stages. Each stage coincides with the establishment of a new type of character, distinguished from the preceding ones on the basis of either moral attributes, or dramatic journeys or the general tone of the story the characters inhabit. The first stage started with Antonio Pietrangeli's 1954 film *Il seduttore*, which marked the beginning of the collaboration between Sordi and Sonogo and established the type of the 'average Italian'. This type's cynicism inspired all of the *commedia all'italiana* performers. The second stage spanned from 1959 to 1963 and is closely tied to three characters played by Sordi: Oreste Jacovacci in Mario Monicelli's *La grande guerra* (1959, co-starring Vittorio Gassman), Alberto Innocenzi in Luigi Comencini's *Tutti a casa* (1961) and Silvio Magnozzi in Dino Risi's *Una vita difficile* (1961). These three characters presented Sordi's distinctive negative trademarks for the majority of their dramatic journeys, but redeemed themselves in the end of each film. Significantly all three films featured a war or Resistance setting and therefore revisit a *milieu* associated with Italian *neorealismo*⁴¹. In the years between 1959 and 1963 Sordi alternated this redemptive type with his usual entirely negative one of the 'average Italian'.

The third stage began in 1963 when Sordi and Sonogo created the new type of the Italian on holiday for Gian Luigi Polidoro's film *Il diavolo*, set in Sweden. This new type, as Sordi recalled, presented some positive characteristics throughout the entire film:

He was a man who belonged to the generation of *I vitelloni*, of *Un americano a Roma* too, but more adult, more refined. He came out of a disastrous post-war period, started a family, purchased a city car. [...] In other words I felt that it was time to present to the public a more positive type who, on the other hand, also had

⁴¹ This aspect of the *neorealismo-commedia* relationship constitute a different area of my current research.

to provoke laughter, because the saint, the hero types have never made anyone laugh⁴².

This new type was devised in response to the success achieved by Gassman and the other *commedia all'italiana* stars with their appropriation of the entirely negative middle-class Italian that Sordi had introduced to represent the Economic Miracle on screen. The type of the 'Italian on holiday' also allowed the filmmakers to avoid the constant repetition of the Italian urban setting and cut production costs, as often these films were shot by crews of five or six elements with hand-held cameras and without paying legal licenses. In fact films such as *Il diavolo* and *Fumo di Londra* (1966, the first film directed by Sordi himself) are a good example of a compromise that solved the «aesthetic dilemma between the enslavement of the star and the documentary without actors» that Bazin pointed out in his articulation of the neorealist «amalgam». The shooting conditions resembled *cinema-verité* and the films have sometimes been defined as documentaries featuring a star⁴³.

The fourth and final stage of Sordi's involvement in *commedia all'italiana* started in 1971 with his first openly tragic role in *Detenuto in attesa di giudizio* (directed by Nanni Loy) and ended with a similarly tragic impersonation in *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* (1977, directed by

⁴² «Era lo stesso uomo che aveva appartenuto alla generazione dei *Vitelloni* e di *Un americano a Roma*, ma più adulto, più progredito. Quello che è uscito da un dopoguerra disastroso, ha messo su famiglia, si è comprato la seicento [...] Insomma sentivo che era venuto il momento di presentare al pubblico un personaggio positivo che doveva far ridere, però, perchè il santo, l'eroe non hanno mai fatto ridere nessuno». Grazia Livi, *Alberto Sordi*, cit., p.132.

⁴³ Giuseppe Marotta noted the singularity of *Il diavolo* essentially being a documentary featuring a star in his review of the film published on the April 23rd, 1963 edition of *L'Europeo*: «It is not the plot, in this *Il diavolo*, to make the actor [*shine*], but rather the actor who makes the plot [*do so*]. Without Alberto Sordi, the film would be nothing but half a documentary, although a classy one». (In the original text: «Non è la vicenda, in questo *Il diavolo*, che fa l'attore, bensì l'attore che fa la vicenda. Privo di Alberto Sordi, il film non sarebbe che un mezzo documentario, seppure di classe».)

Mario Monicelli). In continuity with the neorealist «amalgam», Sordi repeatedly countered what the audience was expecting from him. In the mid 1950s his realistic representations of the vile nature of the middle-class Italian subverted the audience's expectation of a lower class slapstick *macchietta* similar to the ones of the older school of *farse* comedians like Totò. Once his negative type was established and expected by the public, he kept countering this expectation by introducing new types: the redemptive one, the partially positive 'Italian on holiday' and finally the openly tragic type⁴⁴.

A closer look at Sordi's character in *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* shows that his constant subversion of previously established types was

⁴⁴ In a similar way other *commedia all'italiana* performers' star images subverted the expectations of their audiences. Vittorio Gassman, for example, went from being a melodrama villain in Italian and American films produced in the post-war period to a lower class sympathetic loser with *I soliti ignoti*. He then embodied the cynical middle-class Italian of the Economic Miracle since *Il sorpasso* and onwards. He ultimately played an openly tragic role in Dino Risi's *Profumo di donna* (1974). Manfredi started as nothing but a sidekick of Sordi in *farse* such as Mauro Bolognini's *Guardia, guardia scelta, brigadiere, maresciallo* (1956) and then entered the realist realm of *commedia all'italiana* by substituting Marcello Mastroianni in the sequel of *I soliti ignoti* directed in 1960 by Nanni Loy, titled *Audace colpo dei soliti ignoti*. In it Manfredi plays the character of an expert in automobiles who is struggling with the fact that his son his being raised by his wife's new companion. Even though he was largely associated with naive peasant types in the 1960s, his stardom subverted the audience's expectations furthermore when he was revealed to be an unlikely educated shoemaker in Luigi Magni's *Nell'anno del Signore* (1969) and ultimately when he played an openly dramatic role in the spiritual, almost philosophical comedy he directed himself in 1972, *Per grazia ricevuta*. A similar subversion of the audiences expectations took place in the case of the star image of Marcello Mastroianni, who acted in many *commedie all'italiana* as well as in 'art films' directed by Federico Fellini. Jacqueline Reich's study of Mastroianni's stardom point out how the actor projected the image of a Latin Lover type creating an expectation in the public which was repeatedly subverted as he played the roles of impotent (*Il bell'Antonio*, directed by Mauro Bolognini in 1960), cuckolded (*Divorzio all'italiana*, 1961) and homosexual (*Una giornata particolare*, directed by Ettore Scola in 1977) males. Jacqueline Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004.

significant and not accidental. In this film Sordi played a state employee named Giovanni Vivaldi. Vivaldi constantly advises his son to be cynical and encourages him to only think for himself. Giovanni's aggressive behaviour in the Roman traffic is a further reference to Sordi's cynical type of the average Italian of the Economic Miracle. The character's attitude towards politics is also contradictory and reminiscent of Sordi's mid- 1950s cowards. He claims to be eligible for a bigger pension because he fought in the Resistance. Shortly afterwards, however, he tries to inspire his son by quoting Mussolini: «Many enemies, more honour. Hey, someone who had giant balls said it!»⁴⁵. This reference to Fascism on the part of Sordi's character is another implicit nod to *neorealismo*, one that the *commedia all'italiana* filmmakers previously reiterated in films such as Dino Risi's *Il vedovo* (1959) and *Il sorpasso* (1962), in which they ridiculed characters either physically resembling Mussolini or quoting his speeches to express their own nostalgia for the unfulfilled neorealist ideal of the reconstruction of the country on a democratic basis at a time in which

It became evident to many on the left that there were, after all, no dramatic alterations in governmental power and the makeup of social institutions. In cinema, comedy became a viable instrument with which to capitalize on this cynicism, functioning in a society that was increasingly geared to material success. Comedy became a permissible (and entertaining) weapon against the status quo, particularly in making public what was previously concealed, if not censored⁴⁶.

The first half of the plot of *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* consists of comedic scenes in which Vivaldi tries to have his son helped in passing the state exam and be hired in the Ministry where he himself works. He even joins a Masonic lodge to have a copy of the entrance exam questions in advance. The scene of Vivaldi's initiation to the Masons is

⁴⁵ Molti nemici e molto onore. Aò, l'ha detto uno che c'aveva du' cojoni così!

⁴⁶ Marcia Landy, *Stardom, Italian style*, cit., pp. 119-120.

a further confirmation of the comedic tone established in the first part of the film. Giovanni is blindfolded and told he will have to face «the test of death»⁴⁷. He is handed a plastic cup, he snuffs and asks the man standing beside him: «what is this?»⁴⁸ His friend whispers «Amaro Montenegro»⁴⁹ and Vivaldi drinks it in one sip, commenting «Jeez, that is good!»⁵⁰.

Halfway through the film, however, after the audience's expectation of Sordi's satirical middle-class type has been confirmed, the tone changes dramatically as his son is murdered by a terrorist in front of the Ministry on the morning of the exam. Sordi's performance undergoes a radical transformation as his character becomes obsessed by grief for this loss. Vivaldi also has to face the consequences of his wife's (played by Shelley Winters) paralysis, induced by the trauma of being apprised of her son's assassination by a television announcement. Eventually Giovanni Vivaldi recognizes his son's murderer and, instead of informing the police, he abducts him. Sordi's character takes justice in his own hands, tortures the terrorist and ends up killing him. Depicting Vivaldi's dramatic transformation Sordi gave one of the most powerful performances of his career.

Un borghese piccolo piccolo is an adaptation of a Vincenzo Cerami novel and therefore was not originally conceived as a *commedia all'italiana*. Significantly it was Sordi and former neorealist screenwriter Sergio Amidei who convinced Monicelli to have comedic situations abounding in the first half of the film and thus subvert the audience's expectation through a powerful dichotomy. The director commented on the casting of Sordi for the part of Vivaldi:

⁴⁷ «la prova della morte»

⁴⁸ «Aò ma che è?»

⁴⁹ Amaro Montenegro is an after dinner digestive drink, somewhat similar to Jaegermeister.

⁵⁰ «Ammazza, bono!»

I treated the subject in a violent and mature mode, but I chose Sordi, not Volontè. Sordi is the most loved man by Italians, the actor that entertains them, the prototype of *commedia all'italiana*. I inserted him in this story to elicit shock in order to demonstrate how easy it is to become a monster when one wants to take justice into one's own hands⁵¹.

Monicelli's words are revelatory of how Sordi's starring in the film was instrumental to its realism. It was the presence of a beloved performer identified with realist comedy that brought the spectators to feel that such a transformation could have happened to anyone in the audience during the dark times of the '*anni di piombo*'⁵².

As the example of *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* and the analysis of Sordi's contradictory types show, balancing the repetitive casting crucial to all forms of popular entertainment with a radical subversion of the types established by its stars was a strategy, one unique to *commedia all'italiana* among the popular comedic genres which arose after the post-war neorealist wave.

De-negotiating expectations: the «curious misconception» of Sordi's star image

When I refer to a 'strategic' subversion of audiences' expectations in the case of the stardom of the *commedia all'italiana* genre in general and of Alberto Sordi in particular I am not simply talking about the occasional casting of a performer in an odd role in comparison to the ones he is usually cast in. As Richard Dyer points out, contradictory, developing or ever-changing star images are quite common even in Hollywood:

⁵¹ Remì Fournier Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style. The Golden Age of Italian Film Comedies*, Continuum, New York, 2008, p. 32.

⁵² Literally '*lead years*', this is an expression by which the wave of terrorism in Italy in the 1970s is referred to.

It is misleading to think of the texts combining cumulatively into a sum total that constitute the image, or alternatively simply as being moments in a star's image's career. [...] The image is a *complex totality* and it does have a *chronological dimension*. What we need to understand that totality in its temporality is the concept of *structured polysemy*. By 'polysemy' is meant the multiple but finite meanings and effects that a star image signifies. [...] This polysemy is *structured*. In some cases, the various elements of signification may *reinforce* one another. In other cases, the elements may be to some degree in *opposition* or *contradiction*, in which case the star's image is characterised by attempts to negotiate, reconcile or mask the difference between the elements, or else simply hold them in tension. [...] Images also have a *temporal dimension*. Structured polysemy does not imply stasis; images develop or change over time⁵³.

The peculiar subversion of audience expectation I have pointed out in the case of Sordi's comedic practice is not simply constituted by the introduction of new types altering his star image over the course of his career. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The peculiarity of this stardom is the fact that even though the public had progressively experienced the establishment of new types which subverted the initial conception of Sordi's star image, at the moment of the release of a new *commedia all'italiana* the public kept walking in the cinemas with that initial conception intact, rejuvenated, as it were. Sordi's regular screenwriter Rodolfo Sonogo noted that

Initially [*Sordi*] was used as an actor from me and others – but just for one aspect of his nature, his artistry, his capabilities: that of pure humour, of caricature, of impersonating ability, which is very strong. Then someone, and I think it was actually me, started to believe in other qualities of his, those of an actor who could have been complete. At the beginning he was restricted to the purely comedic, it was believed that he should never be used to discuss a serious or important topic ever, never to deploy dramatic or pathological tones, etc. Later on it was understood that he had this dual ability. There is a curious misconception that I could never explain to myself, maybe due to the critics, or maybe due to a hidden and confused need of the audi-

⁵³ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, cit., pp. 63-64.

ence to take and remember only the worst side of Sordi, or at least the most superficial side. Even after films in which he proved to have very skilled dramatic abilities, such as *Una vita difficile*. With Sordi, eighty percent of the time the public went [to the movie-theatre] just to laugh and it was then confronted with dramatic films⁵⁴.

It is in this «curious misconception» that the exceptionality of Sordi's stardom resides, in other words in the fact that despite having taken part into the negotiations, reconciliations and tensions which developed the «structured polysemy» of Sordi's star image with his introduction of new contradictory types, the audience constantly reverted back to its original signification, his purely comedic dimension, placing itself back in a constantly *de*-negotiated position in which its expectations could be radically subverted once again, as if it were a canvas that constantly became blank again.

How did Sordi's star image, and to a lesser extent those of the other *commedia all'italiana* performers, acquire this peculiar connotation? The answer does not necessarily reside in his films. As Richard Dyer states,

⁵⁴ «Dapprima [*Sordi*] è stato sfruttato come attore da me e da altri - ma soltanto in un aspetto del suo carattere, del suo mestiere, delle sue possibilità: quella della pura comicità, della caricatura, della capacità d'imitazione, che è fortissima. Poi qualcuno, e credo di essere stato proprio io, ha creduto anche in altre sue qualità, quelle cioè di un attore che poteva essere completo. Nei primi tempi lo si confinava al comico, si sosteneva che non dovesse mai per un momento toccare un argomento serio e importante, usare tonalità patetiche, drammatiche, eccetera. Poi si è capito che lui aveva questa doppia capacità. C'è una specie di curioso equivoco, che io non sono mai riuscito a spiegarmi, e che forse è dovuto alla critica, o forse a un bisogno nascosto e confuso della platea di prendere o di ricordare di Sordi sempre e solo il lato peggiore, comunque quello più superficiale. Anche dopo film in cui aveva dato la misura di altissime qualità drammatiche, per esempio dopo *Una vita difficile*. Con Sordi nell'ottanta per cento dei casi la gente andava [al cinema] soltanto per ridere e poi si trovava davanti a film drammatici». Goffredo Fofi, *Alberto Sordi. L'Italia in bianco e nero*, cit., p. 116.

The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies, and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech⁵⁵.

Watching a DVD collection of Sordi's television appearances recently produced by Raitrade and published by the newspaper *La Repubblica* in association with the periodical *L'Espresso*, entitled *Il grande Albertone: Alberto Sordi in tv*, I noticed that, when walking on the sets of immensely popular variety shows of the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s such as *Il musicchiere*, *Studio uno* or *Fantastico* Sordi mostly delivered his old repertoire from the *avanspettacolo* days or embodied the *macchiette* from his radio shows of the late 1940s, rather than simply 'plugging-in' the realist comedies in which he starred that were currently playing in the theatres via standard interviews with the television hosts, as is common practice⁵⁶. He may have chosen to privilege impersonations, musical numbers of song and dance and slapstick gags for his television appearances because he deemed them more appropriate for the media and for the format of the variety shows to which he was invited, or he may have considered television as a 'holiday' from his pursuit of «*neorealismo* with a satirical outlook» within the *commedia all'italiana* genre. Or, alternatively, this was a conscious strategy on his part with the purpose of 'de-negotiating' the subversion of the audi-

⁵⁵ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies. Film Stars and Society*, British Film Institute Publishing, London, 1993, p. 3.

⁵⁶ In fact Sordi impersonator Max Tortora exploited the Roman actor's reliance on this old material for his public appearances in his parody of Sordi on the early 2000s television show *Convencion*, in which Tortora gave a humorous representation of Sordi as a senile retired celebrity who would constantly interrupt his line of thought shouting non-sequiturs from his gag repertoire.

ences' expectation he carried out with his previous film, an attempt to nurture that «curious misconception» his popularity might have depended upon. It is impossible to know for sure, although biographers such as Grazia Livi reported that, despite receiving countless invitations, Sordi limited appearances in public to a minimum but approached those he participated in as actual show performances in which to showcase his talents, rather than simple celebrity events. This type of attitude on his part suggests that he was extremely aware of the importance that publicity and promotion off the silver screen had for the popularity of his films and seemingly reinforce the thesis of him 'strategically' reminding the public of the more immediately funny aspects of his star image⁵⁷. Conscious or not, these promotional stances certainly contributed to the «curious misconception» noted by Sonogo, as well as Sordi's choice of keeping to alternate realist roles in *commedie all'italiana* and guest appearances in other forms of comedic cinema did.

Conclusions

Many filmmakers of the *commedia all'italiana* genre maintained that their satirical comedies were informed by post-war *neorealismo*. Among them figured the popular Roman actor Alberto Sordi, who went as far as claiming that the *commedie* in which he starred were examples of «neorealist cinema with a comedic tone». Both the involvement of neorealist filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica, Sergio Amidei and Pietro Germi in the *commedia all'italiana* genre and Sordi's appearance in early works by Federico Fellini prove a certain continuity

⁵⁷ Similarly, other *commedia all'italiana* stars pursued, consciously or not, disorientating promotional strategies of this type. For instance, on the eve of the release of the only film he directed, an investigation of the meaning of faith entitled *Per grazia ricevuta* (1971), Nino Manfredi recorded an album of folk songs and played the hit song *Tanto pe' cantà* at the popular song competition of the Festival di Sanremo.

between the two cinematic forms. However, the apparent contradiction between the quantitatively incorrect association of post-war *neorealismo* with the actually limited use of non-professional actors and the *commedia all'italiana* genre's reliance on a solid star system has been an obstacle in recognising and studying such continuity so far.

I have analysed aspects of the stardom of Alberto Sordi, as it informed that of all of the *commedia* stars, and I have identified the constant subversion of audience expectations, as theorised by Bazin in his discussion of the neorealist «amalgam», through the progressive introduction of contradictory types and the establishment of an «unsettling relation» between star and public, as Landy defined *neorealismo*'s contribution to new forms of popular cinema in this context, with Sordi's devising of the negative type of the 'average Italian' as the two primary attributes of the *commedia all'italiana* genre which show its neorealist roots in the arena of stardom. In doing so, I also have shown how Sordi's involvement in the slapstick comedic form of the *farse* and his re-proposition of old *avanspettacolo* and radio material in his television appearances are not in contradiction with his claim of having pursued «*neorealismo* with a satirical outlook», but have rather participated in strengthening such continuity.

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