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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Imaginary work: media representations of work and gender in Italy from the economic miracle to the present day

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Abstract

The article explores media depictions of industrial labour in Italy, with a special focus on visual, film and television portrayals, spanning from the 1960s to the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Rather than delving into an analysis of labour processes, the primary objective of the article is to scrutinise the gendered representations of work and whether and how the representation of work, including all professions, has played a pivotal role in shaping narratives about Italian society and its inherent contradictions. In this context, the article also emphasises the significance of what remains unrepresented, highlighting the absence of work as equally consequential as its presence. Of particular importance within this exploration is the examination of women's work, a realm less frequently depicted than that of men. The article dedicates specific attention to unravelling the nuances of women's role in the workforce, recognising their portrayal as a key element in understanding broader narratives about Italian society and its complexities.

Keywords: work representations; gender; media; contemporary Italy; film and television history

Introduction

Narrative cinema has always found it somewhat hard to portray the working world, especially industrial work, despite the fact that one of the Lumière brothers' first films was *La sortie des usines*, which focused on life in the factory. In fact, cinema and, later, television have often struggled to depict the production process, both because of its intrinsic characteristics, such as repetitiveness, and because of the characteristics of the media themselves. It is no coincidence, then, that *La sortie des usines* already portrayed the factory 'from the point of view of its gates', placing the camera outside, 'with an unintentional but powerful metaphor' (Ortoleva 2012, 27). Of course, starting with Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* in 1936, more than one film has managed to overcome this difficulty of representation, but still in the 1960s, Ottiero Ottieri, one of the most significant voices of Italian 'industrial' literature of the decade, noted that the factory was 'a closed world' into which 'one does not easily enter and exit' (Ottieri 1961, 21).

The aim of this article is to trace the media representation of work in Italy between the 1960s and the 2020s and its gendered dimension. The term 'media representation' is not

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being used to mean the simple depiction of industrial production processes (as in the case of many industrial films, for example), but the way in which cinema and television have narrated and described work, particularly factory work, and with it the social and human models that underlie it. The media representations of work will be considered here as a lens through which to observe a society in transformation, from the years of the 'economic miracle' to those of the 'end of work', passing through the economic and social crisis of the mid-1970s. An attempt will therefore be made to understand how the social aspects of work and workers were depicted through narrative films, television investigations or dramas. In fact, in those decades, cinema and television were the most impactful cultural media in Italy, and through them much of the Italian collective imagination was formed – i.e. how people imagined and gendered work, what they thought about progress, and, through this lens, what vision they had of their own country, its strengths or weaknesses. Of course, this 'imaginary work' also recounts to some extent the real transformations of the economic and social landscape, albeit reinterpreting them in a narrative key, sometimes exaggerating or idealising them. Addressing a broad and undifferentiated audience, however, these narratives did not generally have ideological connotations, although they were often politically oriented. Precisely for this reason, the documentaries and films produced by trade unions, political parties and radical political groups are not examined here; these reflected the worldview of the political entity of which they were an expression and were intended for militant dissemination.

This article deals above all with industrial work, which has long been considered work *par excellence*, so much so that, among the many characteristics attributed to the twentieth century, Italian historiography has spoken of a 'century of work' (Accornero 1997) in which what was meant by 'work' was Fordist work. And yet, as Peppino Ortoleva (2001, 40) remarked, 'the concrete presence of work, industrial and otherwise, in cinema is much more scarce and blurred than one might expect'. In narrative cinema, in fact, the depiction of work in its everyday dimensions and in its identity aspects is rather rare: in most cases, in fact, films limit themselves to summarily describing work contexts or evoking the type of employment of the characters. In many films, therefore, work remains in the background and serves only to outline the historical and social contexts in which the story is set, appealing directly to the viewers' knowledge without pausing to investigate the productive reality being depicted. Take, for example, the opening sequence of the film *Mafioso* (Alberto Lattuada, 1962), in which the production environment of the Innocenti factory in Milan is shown: it serves only to introduce the main character, foreman Antonio Badalamenti played by Alberto Sordi, and, although it shows many moments in the production cycle, from moulding to assembly, from the carousel to the upholstery department, it does not help to better define the public image of the metal worker. Even the exchange of jokes between the foreman and a worker who makes parts at a faster pace than expected – and who is reprimanded for this – does not help to explain some of the most important problems of that period – namely, overproduction and the dynamics of piecework – but only defines the character of the protagonist.

In the following pages, therefore, we focus more on the representation of workers than on work as a productive activity: after all, the workers – or rather, the female workers – were already centre stage in *La sortie des usines*, where they were portrayed as they were leaving the factory and, pouring into the city in 'bourgeois' clothes, becoming indistinguishable from other people – a mass of workers ready to become spectators (Ortoleva 2012). Of course, like the production contexts, the images of workers also sometimes took on symbolic or metaphorical contours rather than describing the real situation of the country's social dynamics; however, it was precisely this characteristic that enabled mass culture to take a critical look at social dynamics or that gave shape to a desire for change.

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Particularly significant in this sense are the gender representations of work, to which specific attention will be devoted in this article; in fact, while few films and television programmes have placed work at the centre of the narrative, those that have featured female workers have been even fewer (Casalini 2017), partly because industrial work has often been considered exclusively male territory, often in contradiction to the reality of the workplace. The truth, as the wide dissemination of the cultural model of the male breadwinner goes to show, is that between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries 'the value and visibility of women's work' were stifled by the intersection of two ideologies: the patriarchal ideology, which over many centuries positioned the genders in a transparent way, placing men on a higher plane'; and that of the modern political economy, 'based on the market and the division of labour', which, while not explicitly identifying a gender order, 'in fact [reclassified] women's dependence in a new way' (Pescarolo 2019, 11).

Such an underestimation of women's work is well illustrated in one of the few films expressly dedicated to female factory workers in the 1950s: Gillo Pontecorvo's medium-length film *Giovanna*, shot in 1955 and presented out of competition at the Venice Film Festival the following year. The film recounts the occupation of a textile factory by female factory workers. From the very first shots, a few effective lines outline the conception of women's work and the condition of female workers in that period: when Giovanna tells her husband Antonio about the workers' decision to occupy the factory in reaction to the dismissal of some of their colleagues, her husband, himself a worker and communist, reminds her that struggles 'are not made for women', who, in his opinion, are not even capable of agreeing on organisational aspects. He also reminds her that her first responsibility is to the family: 'you – he tells her – should go back home, where you have a child' (Medici 2010).

The film, which was part of an international project on the condition of working women, was not widely distributed, and was limited mostly to militant circles (Pagni 2014). This revealed that the subject was of little interest to both the public and the distributors; in fact, during the 1950s, factory workers, and more generally industrial labour, were substantially absent from public representation, which was more attentive, if anything, to recounting unemployment, considered by the cinema 'one of the main themes related to the story of everyday life, showing the faces of hope and despair related to the search for a job' (Bertolotti 2021, 109).

Studies on cinema and work

Before taking a look at the media representations of work and workers, however, we need to dwell for a moment on the way in which Italian historiography has dealt with the subject. Little attention has been paid to it by labour studies, which for a long time have focused mainly on trade union and political aspects. Moreover, as has already been noted, the culture industry itself paid little attention to the labour dimension, although, from the early 1960s onwards such attention did increase.

Initially, Italian historiography dealt mainly with pictorial or photographic representations of labour (Cartiglia 1990; Lanzardo 1999), also because it was only from the 1990s onwards that it began to identify the cinema and audiovisual media as possible sources for its own research (De Luna 1993). It is not surprising, therefore, that by the end of the 1990s, in an important book dedicated to 'workers' worlds in twentieth-century Italy (Musso 1997), the only contribution on media representations was devoted to photography (Lanzardo 1997).

The first, pioneering study devoted to 'the worker in the Italian cinema' dates from the early 1990s and, not by chance, the author was a film critic and not a historian. It opened with a statement that was to be confirmed by subsequent studies: that 'Italian cinema,

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rich in sub-proletarian, bourgeois, petit-bourgeois figures … has never "created" immediately recognisable workers' (Carotti 1992, 7). For this reason, in the following years the need would be felt for a reconnaissance of film heritage, sounded out by searching for films *of* or *about* work. The protagonist of this period, but not the only one, was the audiovisual Archive of the Workers' and Democratic Movement, which conducted the contextual and valuable digitisation of its own film and audiovisual material (AAMOD 1995; Medici 2000; Sismondi and Tassi 2002; Cortellazzo and Quaglia 2007), while also promoting the making of documentaries on the working-class world.

However, it was not until the mid-2000s that a long-term historical analysis came along, dedicated to the representation of factory floor workers in Italy. This broad-scope research work compared public representations and self-representations of the working worlds from 1950 to 1980 (Sangiovanni 2006). In the following years, I produced a number of in-depth studies dedicated to film representations and those of the so-called 'Hot Autumn' (*Autunno Caldo*) (Sangiovanni 2011, 2014), while, at the same time, another book broadened the outlook so as to take in the entire labour context with a study on the many different jobs in Italian-style comedy (Zaccagnini 2009). Even this study, however, was more attentive to the strictly cinematographic dimension and to the critical analysis of films than to the relationship between cinematic representations and historical and social changes. In fact, the analysis of the relationship between cinema and work (or between work and its representations) touches on numerous fields of study, from cinema studies to Italian studies (e.g. Braghetti 2020), sociology (e.g. CIDOSPEL 2001) and psychology (Veronesi 2004), right up to the critical-linguistic-semiotic dimension (e.g. Pinkus 2021), but it does not focus as much on strictly historical aspects, while nevertheless being open to interdisciplinary twists. Among studies of this type, Agnese Bertolotti's research work on society, cinema and consumption in Italy from the reconstruction to the boom stands out. This does not focus exclusively on work but dedicates ample space to it, dwelling in particular on the lack of jobs in the 1950s and on the central position of the 'unemployed worker', who, as the author writes, represents 'a constant presence that accompanies Italian-style comedy to this day' (Bertolotti 2021, 109).

Between the first decade of this century (2000–9) and the 2020s, studies have nonetheless tended to focus above all on job losses and changes in status (Di Nicola 2019; Chirumbolo 2022), analysing in particular 'the widespread sense of loss around which work representation turns today' (Toracca and Zinato 2021, 7). Yet, once again, a specifically historical approach to the issue shows that the dimension of job insecurity can be studied in a long-term perspective. Over time, it has been redefined in relation to the social and individual conceptions of the idea of work. This evolution has been well illustrated by many recent films on the topic (Betti 2019).

A 20-year parable

Now let us go back to the media representations of industrial work and workers. After the substantial silence of the 1950s, corresponding to a phase of repression of political and social dissent that resulted in the factories becoming 'closed worlds', the timid resumption of workers' struggles in the early 1960s – coinciding with an expansive phase of the economy – brought the working-class worlds to the attention of the culture industry, from cinema to television and literature, with the emergence of so-called industrial literature.

Since then, the pattern of the presence of factory workers in the public sphere can be compared to a parable. Workers returned to the public stage during the 1960s and were increasingly represented during the prolonged conflictual period from 1968 to 1973. In the second half of the 1970s, however, their presence began to thin out, until they

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suddenly disappeared in the early 1980s, when factory work seemed to vanish from the public horizon (Sangiovanni 2006). Such a parable is in part a reflection of the transformations of the labour market and was undoubtedly affected by the spread – and radical nature – of the workers' struggles that placed work under public scrutiny. It was also influenced by changes in the political climate, marked by the greater openness towards reforms of the first centre-left government and a subsequent period of expansion of workers' rights. This expansion began with the passing of the Workers' Statute in 1970 and continued throughout the following decade.

In each of these phases, however, the way in which workers were represented was not homogeneous. During the 1960s, for example, two different and somewhat antithetical images faced one another: that of the 'integrated' worker, who benefited from the 'Italian miracle'; and that of workers as the 'new poor' – i.e. those who paid the costs, both in economic terms and in terms of physical and mental health. These were then joined by a third image, which viewed the worker as a rebel entity; this representation could obviously be seen in positive terms, for those who looked from the left and exalted the force of social transformation in a revolutionary sense, or in negative terms, for those who considered the political activities of workers socially dangerous.

The boom years

Media representations – and in particular visual ones – contributed to this process of highlighting the working class on the public scene, starting with a film such as *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Luchino Visconti, 1960), a movie about internal migration that ended with a sequence shot in front of the Alfa Romeo plant in Arese in which one of Rocco's brothers, who had become a factory worker, asserted that individuals should have the chance to 'live without being servants of others and without ever forgetting their duties'. In that same year, labour disputes were rekindling in Milan and the film's closing sequence seemed to echo the workers' demands for greater dignity. The same could be said for two films by Ugo Gregoretti: *The New Angels* (1962), which explores the situation of young people; and *Omicron* (1963), a social science fiction tale denouncing the working-class condition and inspired by 'Inchiesta alla Fiat' (Investigation at Fiat), published a few years earlier (Carocci 1958). Generally speaking, however, even when they claimed decent working conditions, workers were depicted as losers: this is particularly evident in films such as *I compagni* (Mario Monicelli, 1963) and the lesser known *Pelle viva* (Giuseppe Fina, 1962). The first was set in the spinning mills of Turin at the end of the nineteenth century, in the years of the first workers' struggles and the spread of socialism. Despite being set in the past, the film clearly echoed the changing climate in the country: after all, as Monicelli himself said in an interview, 'these things could be felt, people understood them' because the film had been shot in the climate of 'the reawakening of Fiat, in '62, after years of company unionism' (Faldini and Fofi 1981, 148). And yet, in the film, the strike ends tragically and the workers' defeat is only partially mitigated by the socialist song that accompanies their return to the factory and that hints that the struggle will somehow continue. *Pelle viva* was even more direct, and not only because it featured a contemporary setting: the film recounted the life of a foundry worker, Andrea Meloni, following him between hard factory work and a difficult daily commute, in search of a new social position that he could achieve only by remaining in the place where the social and factory hierarchies put him. Meloni is fired for having complained about the intensification of the work pace and can only find a job as a construction worker. In the last sequences, he shows that he has even managed to suppress his instinctive rebellion against injustice by remaining silent after a construction site accident. 'One should not say the right things. One should not say them if one is alone in thinking them'

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is his bitter outburst upon being fired, a phrase that, to some extent, was the perfect compendium of the image of defeat that would characterise workers in the mid-1960s. At that time, the wage increases of the early part of the decade were decimated by the short-lived economic trend of 1963–4, which was also used by employers to intensify the work pace and to reabsorb, in the name of production requirements, the trade union gains of the early 1960s (Crainz 1996). In short, in those years, the cinema, although dedicating only a handful of films directly to the theme of work, was able to effectively denounce and criticise the limits of incipient modernisation, showing a complex reality far removed from the myths and rituals of the boom. Moreover, these were the years of the birth of Italian-style comedy, which, while indulging in a bitter smile, was moving in the same direction. Among the humiliated workers of the period were not only blue-collar workers but also white-collar workers, as portrayed in the film by Ermanno Olmi *Il posto* (The Job) (1961) which, despite talking about successful social advancement, did not indulge in any celebration of the boom; on the contrary, it showed its costs, in this case more existential than material.

Women at work

Among the transformations brought about by the 'economic miracle' was certainly an increase in the employment of women, both in industry and in the tertiary sector, although, strangely, the general statistics also showed an increase in the number of unemployed women, a phenomenon probably linked to the mass departure from the countryside and the difficulty of finding new employment in the cities, where perhaps urbanised countrywomen carried out home-based jobs not included in the figures (Pescarolo 2019, 272–278).

In any case, beyond the difficult interpretation of the data, there was a widespread feeling among the public that we were witnessing a new phenomenon. This was demonstrated by the television investigation *La donna che lavora* (The Working Woman) by Ugo Zatterin and Giovanni Salvi, which was broadcast on the national channel in 1959. In eight episodes, the two journalists investigated women's work in all its various forms, from factory work to work in the fields, office work and housework. As they themselves explained, the idea of the programme was to 'touch the living chords of our current society' by showing 'the picture … of women's participation in the active life of Italian society, with all its lights and shadow'. The objective was in line with the RAI's (Italian state television's) pedagogical editorial policy of those years, the intention of which – to use Zatterin's words again – 'was not to solve the problems, but only to set them out as clearly as possible, so that all Italians, each according to his or her duties and possibilities, could help solve them' (Zatterin 1959, 13). This was the sort of 'soft modernisation' project that was to characterise the RAI throughout at least the following decade, when director general Ettore Bernabei's explicit mandate was to support centre-left policies (Scaglioni 2013; Guazzaloca 2011). At the time, the RAI launched a journey of discovery of a country guided by Catholic social and value models and recounted the economic miracle without dwelling on its less bright and more dramatic aspects. *La donna che lavora*, in fact, was supported by a commentary that lingered over the images in paternalistic and condescending tones, which ended up contradicting Zatterin's stated purpose of objectively showing reality in its many facets. And yet the commentary was often cancelled out by the power of the images shot by cameraman Giorgio Merli, which, for example, showed with relentless precision the fatigue and alienation of factory work, scenes that, at the time, were not only difficult to see on screen but also difficult to read about in the press. And, indeed, Zatterin himself denounced in the magazine *Radiocorriere* the difficulty of recounting the story due to 'the vetoes … of those who do not want foreign eyes – let alone the

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television camera – in their factory, on their farm, in their shop, and in any case do not tolerate their employees expressing opinions of any kind' (Zatterin 1959, 13).

In the case of female workers, then, two forms of control were combined: one concerning the workers' ability to speak about working conditions and the other overseeing female expressiveness. Thus, not only was the first episode devoted to the 'trouble of not being a man' but it was also not unusual for men to answer questions instead of the women workers themselves, especially in less acculturated contexts, such as rural areas, where the entrenchment of traditional cultural models seemed more resistant. Partially different, on the other hand, was the situation of female factory workers and shop assistants, who were more capable of claiming a certain autonomy and independence in front of the camera, on both an individual and an economic level. From this point of view, indeed, such behaviour seemed to anticipate what Natalia Aspesi was to write a few years later in the daily *Il Giorno*, when, describing unskilled female workers in the Veneto region, she pointed out that, passing 'from the land to the factory … from a rural to an industrial environment', they had seen work as a 'way of earning money, as best they could', and thus to acquire their independence. A misunderstood independence, since, instead of finding 'less hard work and a reliable salary', these female factory workers toiled in conditions similar to those of the nineteenth-century spinning mills, with 'girls glued to machinery, without even time to raise their heads out of curiosity' (Aspesi 1965).

Public spotlight on work

With the phase of intense protests between 1968 and 1973, the representation of factory work changed radically, because the new focus it put on the working-class world, obviously not always positive, embedded work itself in the collective imagination. The most evident sign of this was the increase in films and television shows dedicated to the working world, which had never before been so numerous. Suffice it to say that, from 1971 up to 1975, at least a dozen films were made with working-class settings, without counting militant films and documentaries such as *Apollon* (1969) or *Contratto* (1970), both directed by Ugo Gregoretti. And the same was true for television, which had never before paid so much attention to labour issues: to get an idea, according to a 1969 study, in the early months of that very significant year, news programmes had dedicated only 0.5 per cent of their time to the factory and just over 5 per cent to workers' unions; nor had television productions fared any better, having until then generally dedicated very little space to the representation of the classes then considered subordinate (Rositi 1970). During these years of intense conflict, three different, sometimes opposing, public images of the worker were taking shape and replacing the previous ones. On the one hand, the conservative press and television, in particular newscasts, portrayed struggling workers as instigators of unrest and therefore as a threat, endorsing their more traditional image. On the other hand, an opposite representation existed, put forward by the trade unions, portraying the workers as responsible social entities and an engine of democratic transformation. The third representation was of workerist origin and saw the young immigrant as a revolutionary. Its symbol, that of the mass worker, continued to be evoked well into the 1970s.

Lulù Massa was the name of the main character in *La classe operaia va in paradiso*, the 1971 film by Elio Petri, written by Ugo Pirro and starring Gian Maria Volontè, which is emblematic of Italian filmography on the working class, evoked with corrosive irony by the surname of the main character. The term '*massa*' alludes to the mass workers on the assembly lines who played a leading role in the protests of the late 1960s. The film, which won the Grand Prix of the Cannes jury together with *Il caso Mattei* and was a box-office success, portrays an articulate and complex image of the working-class world in

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which youth rebellion and trade union reformism coexist, but it also focuses on the physical and mental health issues resulting from the subtle class transformation that the workers were undergoing in the wake of mass consumerism. It is precisely this stratification that makes *La classe operaia va in paradiso* one of those films that can always provide new keys to interpretation. Despite its title, it does not portray workers as a class but as *individuals*.[1] Indeed, Petri himself said in an interview that, for him, 'depicting a worker [was] like depicting any other human being' and that he had narrated 'the story of us all, of how in this society, we cannot but live in alienation' (Faldini and Fofi 1981, 82–83). Thus, the working-class condition became the metaphor for a more general condition that we could define – to use the terminology of the time – as existential alienation; and, almost by metonymy, workers became the representation of the working classes and of all employed people.

This process was even more evident in the film *Romanzo popolare* (1974), written by Age and Scarpelli and directed by Mario Monicelli, a comedy that, as critics noted with some perplexity, showed that 'jealousy dramas are not only bourgeois' (Petraglia 1975). Perhaps because of this message, *Romanzo popolare* was one of the commercial successes of that year, taking in over 3 billion lire at the box office. The film was initially supposed to be set in Rome and the protagonists were supposed to belong to the Roman white-collar middle class. When subsequently it was decided to set the story in Milan and make blue-collar workers the protagonists, the screenwriters never considered the problem 'of the diversity between the Milan working class and the Rome proletariat'. 'We thought,' said Age, 'that Milanese workers were not much different to workers in other factories in other cities we had become acquainted with. The same trade unionist who puts forward certain ideas and certain intentions could not be too dissimilar from a trade unionist in central or southern Italy' (Faldini and Fofi 1981, 171). The writer was referring to the film's protagonist and narrator, Giulio Basletti, a unionised Milanese worker and natural leader played by Ugo Tognazzi, who ended up representing an average Italian with whom spectators could identify regardless of class affiliations or geographical location. And as in Petri's film, one of the keys to this identification was consumption: but while Lulù Massa had a house full of useless or pseudo-opulent objects, the house of Giulio Basletti and his young wife Vincenzina was – as a critic of the time remarked – 'a careful recap of Upim-Standa bargains' (Bernacchi 1974, 62), meaning of average consumption products. And, again to continue the comparison with *La classe operaia va in paradiso*, Petri also noted that his protagonist was a man who 'suffers … forced as he is to assume a bourgeois model because consumer society forces him, for his own survival, to become a consumerist' (Faldini and Fofi 1981, 83). In this sense, in short, his surname Massa would not seem to refer so much to the mass worker as to the idea of a massification of the various social classes in the name of consumption.

The focus on consumption enabled these two films to sensitively capture a transformation in the Italian social landscape of those years – namely, the increasing porosity and permeability of the social classes, which was then described by Paolo Sylos Labini in a very well-known and much discussed book, *Saggio sulle classi sociali* (1974). At the same time, these two films were the clearest sign of the unprecedented centrality of blue-collar workers in the Italian social landscape, and in particular of the representation of the trade union matrix that saw industrial workers as the cutting edge of a responsible social class, on whose shoulders the reforms that the country needed could rest. If this change in the collective imagination were not borne in mind, it would be difficult to explain the presence of so many workers or trade unionists on Italian screens at the time; moreover, they appeared in films that were very different, from typically mass market ones, such as *Il sindacalista* (Luciano Salce, 1972) to comedies of social criticism and manners like *Mimì metallurgico ferito nell'onore* (Lina Wertmüller, 1972). Particularly significant in this sense

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was *Delitto d'amore* (Luigi Comencini, 1974), a film that, despite abiding by the stylistic traits of melodrama, is about a worker who kills his boss, a situation that was completely unimaginable until only a few years earlier. Some critics reproached the screenwriters for having disguised in working clothes a banal love story that seems to have been taken straight from the pages of a women's weekly (Rossi 1974). Instead, this mixing of the central issues of the political debate of the period (such as the right to health) with forms of popular cinema not only made some films with a working-class setting successful (both *Mimì metallurgico* and *Romanzo popolare* were among the box-office hits of the time) but also signalled the spread of a new sensibility with respect to issues that evidently went well beyond the factory environment.

What was then happening on the small screen was also a clear sign of this change. In spite of the aforementioned limitations of daily news, in 1968–9 there had been a series of important in-depth reports in the magazine *TV7*,[2] anticipating one of the most characteristic features underlying the struggles of those months: the workers' demand for greater dignity. And yet, the real change of register would manifest itself in the early 1970s: in 1970, in fact, a television series entitled *Turno C* was first screened. This was managed directly by the unions and was to continue until 1976. And, above all, in early 1971, between January and February, a five-part programme was aired entitled *La spinta dell'autunno*, which, according to the reconstruction of *Vie Nuove*, the Italian Communist Party's weekly family magazine, came into existence as a result of the workers' protests about the silence of the RAI. The programme was in two separate parts: the first part consisted of a film that reconstructed some of the events of the 'Hot Autumn' in chronological order, while in the second part the presenter, Piero Ottone, interviewed, in a television studio, a number of guests – trade unionists, industrialists, politicians – on the topics of the episode. The first part of the programme was undoubtedly the most interesting because the film images made it possible to show the workers' struggles as a moment of collective discussion and choice, for example with the sequences of factory assemblies. The viewers thus became acquainted – with all the force of direct testimony – both with the reality of factory work and with the workers' desire to change the state of things for the better, thus reinforcing the responsible image of the workers themselves (Cesareo, 1995).

Then, the following year, an original drama, as unusual as it was important, written by Arnaldo Bagnasco and directed by Salvatore Nocita was aired, entitled *I Nicotera*. This television production with a working-class setting was shot in a realistic documentary style and featured scenes that 'conveyed a good idea of the working-class community' and which, for the first time, showed on television 'some aspects of factory conditions: the difference between physical fatigue and nervous fatigue, the impact of technological progress on relations between workers' (Sangiovanni 2014, 40).

'The women are here …'

Female employment was essentially stable during those years, and female workers were also finding a new place on the public scene. Their presence in the pages of weekly family magazines was a clear sign of this: '[F]emale workers,' wrote, for example, *Vie Nuove*, 'number 1,695,000: a large number, although it could be higher were there no archaic forms of discrimination.' So it is, added the magazine, that the female worker becomes 'a leading figure' showing 'the progress that entering the working world can bring about for a woman' (Tosi 1972). The real novelty, however, was represented by the cover pages dedicated to female workers by *Famiglia Cristiana*, the Catholic family weekly, which published two issues, in 1971 and 1973, with female workers intent on doing typically male jobs, such as using a welding machine or building an engine. While these were certainly a sign of a new Catholic attention to the world of work, at the same time the weekly showed

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perplexity, perhaps even fear, about this new female protagonism. In fact, it wrote that, with their presence in productive sectors generally reserved for men, women had 'taken a further step along the road to replacing the male element', and then emphasised the traditional arguments in favour of a gender distinction of jobs: heavy engineering, it added, requires 'a particular physical and psychological predisposition and certain aptitudes for which, in principle, men are undoubtedly better suited' (*Famiglia Cristiana* 1973).

The change in the representation of women at work was never linear, not even in terms of visual imagery. While, on the one hand, female workers enjoyed a new visibility, on the other hand they often continued to be confined to traditional or secondary roles. Regarding the first aspect, think of *La Califfa* (Alberto Bevilacqua, 1970), a film set in an industrial milieu which, although not memorable, had a female worker as its protagonist. As for the second aspect, many examples could be given. In fact, secondary roles were played by both Lidia, Lulù Massa's companion in *La classe operaia via in paradiso*, played by Mariangela Melato, and Fiore, the young lover of metallurgist Mimì, also played by Melato. Although they had a different importance – Fiore is a true deuteragonist, unlike Lidia – both roles were functional to the development of the male protagonist and the description of his neuroses. The same was true of another woman evoked by Lulù, Adalgisa, a workmate and occasional lover of his, whose sexual objectification allowed him to sustain the frenetic work pace ('I have a technique for concentrating, she knows it. I set my mind on it. I think of an arse, her arse [Adalgisa's]. There's nothing else to do in here, so what's the alternative?').

The case of Carmela, played by Stefania Sandrelli, the co-star of *Delitto d'amore*, was different. Like Nullo (Giuliano Gemma), the other protagonist of the film, she was also a worker and had a central role in the plot because her death from the poisonous fumes of the factory was the cause of the 'crime of love' referred to in the original title. Although not of secondary importance, however, hers was the traditional role of an innocent victim, whose disappearance triggered the male action.

But at this point, a further contradiction appears, a sign of a period of profound social and cultural transformation, of the redefinition of roles: in these films, although forced into secondary roles, the female characters end up being the most interesting. Carmela, for example, was certainly the victim of a dual system of power, patriarchal and industrial, but above all she was the condensation point for the many contradictions recounted in the film, from pollution to the difficult integration between North and South. And even Vincenzina, the young southern bride of Giulio Basletti in *Romanzo popolare*, appears marginal in the first part of the film, where the working-class environment is described, but then, in the second part, she emerges in all her complexity and relevance, 'a female character with an almost feminist identity', as the screenwriters put it, 'more mature and aware than the men she is surrounded by' (Faldini and Fofi 1981, 172).

In fact, Vincenzina, left alone, begins working in the factory like her husband, a job that, for her, marks the culmination of a path of individual emancipation. This is expressed with poetic synthesis in Enzo Jannacci's song *Vincenzina e la fabbrica*, which is part of the film's soundtrack: 'Vincenzina in front of the factory / Vincenzina no longer wears a scarf'. And yet Vincenzina's factory was certainly not Giulio's, who had pointed it out to her proudly at the beginning of the film, distinguishing it from the others by the colour of the smoke from the chimney. While, for the man, the factory was the symbol of the worker-producer's pride, as well as the place where a collective identity was formed, for the young woman it was only a foreign and oppressive place that pervaded her existence.

The distance between these two characters meaningfully represents the change of the second half of the 1970s, of which the protagonist of *Romanzo popolare* became in some way the symbol; if, in the first part of the film, Giulio appeared as the perfect incarnation

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of the victorious worker of the 1968–73 movement, modern and reformist, in the second half, when the private dimension took over from the public one and he gave in to jealousy when faced with his wife's betrayal, he became the symbol of the crisis of that model of worker.

In the mid-1970s, therefore, although the factory worker continued to remain at the centre of the public scene in the long wake of 1969, his representation began to become more blurred, less defined. It is true to say that the labourer was still the symbolic figure of the proletarian, of the worker, but he was becoming less and less a symbol of the working class: a widespread representation of workers as a social group, as a collective subject, as a class, therefore seemed to fade, and instead a representation based on individuals began to emerge, with a shift from the public to the private dimension that reflected a social process that was just then beginning to be detected (Calvi 1977; Gozzini 2011) and that would characterise the following decades.

Not only blue-collar workers

In the second half of the 1970s, the economic crisis introduced a series of socio-economic changes that altered the worlds of work and were also reflected in their cinematic and television representations. These were the years of the emergence of the 'third Italy', a new productive geography that was then defined by a book that attracted public discussion (Bagnasco 1977). Production began to move from the industrial triangle towards the north-east and the Adriatic coast, and, at the same time, to change scale, with smaller factories. Large industries, on the other hand, were beginning to experiment with robotisation and to reduce their workforce, partly due to the backlash of the oil shock, which in turn changed the collective perception of progress. At the same time, workers employed in the tertiary sector were beginning to outnumber those in industry.

These were changes that that were deep below the surface and were barely perceived by public opinion, which, in those years, was above all attentive to recording the most evident effects of the crisis, from unemployment to social conflict. Thus, in principle, the representation of the 'responsible' worker who had emerged from the struggles of 1969 persisted in the collective imagination, even if some television productions inadvertently highlighted the crisis.

In 1977, for example, the *Cronaca* crew joined Alfa Romeo workers in producing a three-part feature entitled *Appunti sul lavoro*. This was a programme in which for the first time the factory and the production process were shown to the viewer through the eyes of a new generation of workers. Although, on the whole, the figure of the factory worker was portrayed in a positive light, the programme challenged the two then dominant representations: on the one hand, the positive one of the 'granitic, organic working class, intent on going only from victory to victory, without problems and difficulties'; and, on the other, the negative representation of the 'mass of absentees' that had already emerged immediately after the 'Hot Autumn' and was then reinforced by the economic crisis (Ugolini 1977).

The following year, the RAI was to air a short documentary by Antonello Branca entitled *I tempi della catena*. In this story – a long, on-camera confession by a young Fiat worker – what took centre stage was not the public, collective dimension of the working world but the individual dimension of a young man for whom the factory and work were merely the context in which to place his private relationships with his girlfriend and friends. It was no coincidence that Branca's interview was broadcast in a programme dedicated to young people called *Come mai* (How come), because it was precisely the young workers who perceived their relationship with the factory and work in a different way. As Marco Grispigni summed it up, work was no longer a 'source of identity':

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> [I]nstead of a strong identity/self-representation in the singular, often based on one's own work condition – blue-collar worker, tradesman, craftsman – we have the construction of a 'multiple identity' … of which work is just a small part … when not considered exclusively as time stolen from life and therefore irrelevant to the construction of one's identity. (Grispigni 2019, 130; Revelli 1989)

And even in the cinema – where the presence of workers was thinning out – the individual sphere dominated over the public sphere: think, for example, of a film made by Steno in 1979 called *La patata bollente*, which, despite its sex comedy title, was in fact the story of the identity crisis of a metalworker due to a chance encounter with a young homosexual man (Sangiovanni 2013).

During this radically different phase, in the collective imagination, blue-collar workers were joined by another representative figure: the office worker. While, in the previous decades, white-collar workers had been alternately represented as characters so insignificant that they could only find redemption in the imagination (*L'impiegato*, Gianni Puccini, 1959) or as the dream of individual and class fulfilment of the small and middle bourgeoisie (*Un borghese piccolo piccolo*, Mario Monicelli, 1977), they now ended up replacing factory workers in the role of exploited entities subjected to an arbitrary power. The character that best embodied this figure was the accountant Ugo Fantozzi, invented in literary terms by Paolo Villaggio and who later, in 1975, became the protagonist of a blockbuster film of the same name (*Fantozzi*, Luciano Salce) and of a subsequent successful series. Then, in 1984, the *Impiegati* were to become the eponymous heroes of a film by Pupi Avati that portrayed them as an Italian declination of the yuppies, a social-professional figure that had emerged in the USA a few years earlier and that was to represent a true metaphor for the 1980s. Its protagonists – young, unmarried, lovers of luxury and the good life, like the American yuppies – did not work on Wall Street, however, but in a provincial bank, and, while yearning for a luxurious lifestyle, turned out to be 'halfway between objects of social envy and derision, unable to fully embrace the individualism and cynicism of the US model due to their being too wrapped up in Italian customs' (Gervasoni 2012, 93). After all, even in *Yuppies* (Carlo Vanzina, 1986), only one of the four protagonists, a publicity agent, has a 'new' job symbolic of the 1980s; the others are notaries, dentists and car salesmen, more traditional figures than traders, representing well the relative social stagnation of Italy. And yet the yuppies, even if portrayed in this way, ends up replacing factory workers and also, to some extent, becoming their opposite in cinematic representation.

In fact, at the very beginning of the 1980s, blue-collar workers were starting to disappear from the public scene.

The disappearance of the blue-collar worker

On 16 October 1980, in Turin, at the end of a bitter labour conflict that had led to the closure of Fiat, there was a silent demonstration calling for an end to the strike, which the press dubbed the 'march of the forty thousand'. Immediately afterwards, the unions signed a bad-deal agreement, marking a defeat of such great symbolic significance that, in terms of labour disputes, it would remain in the imagination of Italians as the end of labour conflict. That demonstration was described as the march of the 'bosses' or 'cadres' – i.e. of the office workers – although its composition was much more varied. This, too, was to be an element that contributed to reinforcing in the collective imagination the replacement of blue-collar workers with other categories, reflecting a real change in the labour market. There was an effective downsizing of industrial workers, who dropped from 36.3 per cent in 1981 to 32.3 per cent in 1989, against an increase in service workers from 50.9 per cent to 58.6 per cent in the same period.

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These were all signs of a process of transformation of industry from mass production based on the use of a generic workforce to that of specialised goods, based instead on a flexible and skilled workforce: a process that entailed not only the expulsion of substantial portions of the workforce, but also a growing decline in the social and political influence of the trade unions, marked by two other moments of strong symbolic significance, the Valentine's Day decree of 1984 and the referendum on the sliding scale of the following year that had reduced a form of protection of workers' purchasing power gained in the 1970s (Bertucelli 2003).

It seems no coincidence, therefore, that in those same years the model of the worker that had emerged with the struggles of 1969 also disappeared from the screens. The most symbolic film in this sense is *Mi manda Picone* (Nanni Loy, 1983), whose narrative centrepiece is an Italsider worker, Pasquale Picone, who in the opening scene protests against his dismissal by setting himself on fire during a council meeting in Naples. From then on, however, he disappears and is never seen again: the entire film centres on the search for him, during which it turns out that he had never really been a steelworker and that he did many other jobs.

In the films of the 1980s, factory work began to be replaced by a myriad of other, mainly casual jobs. Traces of this could already be seen in Maurizio Nichetti's first films, *Ratataplan* (1979) and *Ho fatto Splash* (1980), and then – again – in a youth comedy by Franco Amurri, *Il ragazzo del Pony Express* (1986), about a parcel delivery boy, the forebear of today's so-called riders.

These were the signs of a change in the labour market that had been clearly evident since the late 1970s, when the many forms of occasional, casual and marginal work had begun to emerge – and for which there was statistical evidence – as well as multiple jobs and illegal labour. The issue of intellectual unemployment also predominated in that period. It swelled the ranks of casual workers and was recounted at length by the cinema with films like the aforementioned *Ratataplan*, *C'è posto per tutti* (Giancarlo Planta, 1990), *Romanzo di un giovane povero* (Ettore Scola, 1995), *Workers, pronti a tutto* (Lorenzo Vignolo, 2012), *Tutta la vita davanti* (Paolo Virzì, 2008), *Smetto quando voglio* (Sidney Sibilia, 2014) and others.

In that decade, in fact, the very conception of work was changing. In line with what had already emerged in 1977, work ceased to be considered a value in itself, a central element in the construction of a political and civil as well as an individual identity, and became, on the public level, a function of the economy, and, on the personal level, a tool to improve one's economic condition and consequently one's social prestige. This progressive marginalisation of labour in the public sphere was part of a broader transformation of the collective ethos underpinned by two interlinked processes: the emergence of a 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2014) and the increasingly evident emergence of a mass individualism (Sennet 1982; Lasch 1981). It was a change also reflected in the daily press, where, to an increasing extent, work began to be covered in the economic pages, thus becoming a purely economic fact in which the human and social dimension appeared ancillary. Scrolling through the pages of newspapers, in short, factory workers really seemed to have become a *class that no longer existed* (Lerner 1988).

Obviously, although their numbers were diminishing, it was not the workers who were disappearing but their representation. Significant, in this sense, were some films from the mid-1990s that investigated the mutation of the social landscape and the slow dissolution of working-class worlds. Consider, for example, two films from 1994: *Padre e figlio* by Pasquale Pozzessere and *La bella vita*, the debut film of Paolo Virzì, who would later become the most assiduous director in recounting the working world. While Pozzessere's film recounted a generational conflict that also passed through the different values attributed to work, Virzì's movie portrayed in parallel the end of the marriage between a cashier and a blue-collar worker, exploding after the crisis in the Piombino

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steelworks, and the crumbling of the working-class world that had been built around it. Equally significant, only a few years later, was a film entitled *Il posto dell'anima* (Riccardo Milani, 2002), a comedy centred on a company crisis and the consequent disintegration of the working-class community; in this film, the blue-collar workers were now explicitly represented as a subject at risk of extinction, so much so that they elected as their symbols Native Americans, defeated and living in the reserves, and the Marsican bear, a protected animal. Even more interesting, however, is the fact that both films also presented the neoliberal way out of the crisis of the industrial production system – that of 'becoming one's own master', which would be one of the main buzzwords of 'capitalist realism' from the 1980s onwards (Fisher 2009). The characters in Virzì's film invested their savings in buying land and became – to use their own words – the first example of 'seaside reconversion of an industrial enterprise'. In Milani's film, on the other hand, it was a young worker who attempted the path of self-entrepreneurship, thereby breaking down the factory floor solidarity that had been created in the struggle against the multinational company that owned the factory.

At that time, therefore, films were starting to represent one of the central topics of neoliberal culture that had been asserting itself since the 1980s: the opposition between the individual and society, which was resolved to the advantage of the individual and led to the disappearance of 'all forms of social solidarity … in favour of individualism, private property, individual responsibility and family values' (Harvey 2007, 29–30).

From 'working woman' to 'career woman'

At the beginning of the 1980s, photographer Paola Agosti published a book entitled *La donna e la macchina* (Agosti 1983): it was a gallery of portraits of female workers that, on the one hand, bore witness to the substantial female presence in the mechanical engineering industry, but, on the other hand, and in retrospect, appears as a sort of epitaph for the industrial twentieth century.

A few years later, more and more in the collective imagination, the working woman would become a career woman, as in the case of the protagonist of Mike Nichols' 1988 film *La donna in carriera* (originally *Working Girl*), which was among the top 20 box-office hits of the season. The semantic shift from 'working woman' to 'career woman' summarises well the change in the collective imagination that developed during the 1980s, a period dubbed that of the 'second Italian miracle', an economic recovery that, in the public narrative, was also the way out of the 'years of lead'. This is confirmed by the many images of female workers that appear in one of the symbolic advertisements of the 1980s: Amaro Ramazzotti's 'Milano da bere'. The advert featured all 'new' professions that seemed to better represent, more than traditional ones, a finally modern Italy (Gervasoni 2010): models, dancers, 'a young career woman' – precisely – and 'a very punk girl immersed in reading the *Sole 24 ore*' (Deaglio 2010, 237). It was perhaps no coincidence that the premiere of Nichols' film in Milan was organised by an association called Donne in Carriera (Career Women), which had been in existence for a decade and had around 500 members (T.A. 1989). In 1985, the newspaper *la Repubblica* described the career woman as:

> a woman who believes in self-assertion, has mainly a university-level education, travels abroad and speaks languages. She works by choice rather than by necessity, and lives her profession as revenge and challenge to a world that is prejudicially hostile to her, gaining, with each career move, a gratification that repays her efforts. (Bonerandi 1985)

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The same words were to be reiterated two years later in an article describing 'the advance of the "pink collar workers"' – i.e. the presence of women in top positions in companies, which, however, amounted to little more than 2 per cent (S.N. 1987). The fact that the phenomenon was described in the exact same words appears to be a sign of the perpetuation of a representation that pitted female managers against traditional models at the expense of the characteristics considered to be inherent to femininity. This was a representation that was to last for a long time, considering that, still in 2017, a management text was published explaining to women 'how to get ahead without turning into a man' (Cecutti 2017).

As we have already seen, work was less present on cinema screens in those years, partly because Italian cinema was going through a period of retreat into the private sphere, which distanced it from both a collective and a social framework. Work remained above all a background setting for stories that had a narrative focus other than the public dimension; in this key, from the 1990s onwards, work would constitute the context of many television dramas, such as *Commesse* (Rai Uno, 1999, two seasons), which, although defined as a 'professional environment', in no way investigated the working contexts or professions they described. At the same time, however, a tendency existed in serial productions to reconfigure certain typically male territories of the television imagination, such as the action or detective genre, into heroine television, so that 'an ever-increasing number of television dramas have interpreted the professional worlds they portray in a female key … often succeeding in making their viewing less gender-specific and more universal' (Buonanno 2014). These were the protagonists not only of police dramas, such as *Distretto di polizia* (Canale 5, 2000–12, 10 seasons), but also of the legal genre, such as *L'avvocato delle donne* (Rai Due, 1997). They were all signs of a change in collective sensibility, as well as in the labour market, which aligned with an evolution of legislation aimed at achieving greater gender inclusion and which, in the words of Alessandra Pescarolo, went beyond 'the legal principle of formal equality' and, 'for the purpose of sustaining a substantial, concrete equality', legitimated an "unequal right', overturned in favour of the gender which in a certain context appeared discriminated against' (Pescarolo 2019, 309).

Is work back again?

Work returned to the silver screen in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Those were the years of a growing decline in employment, aggravated by the 2008 crisis, and, at the same time, of an erosion of rights and protections, so that most films depicted a new working proletariat that differed from the factory worker. The factory workers were still there – for example in *Ovosodo* (Paolo Virzì, 1997), *Acciaio* (Stefano Mordini, 2012), and *Made in Italy* (Luciano Ligabue, 2018), whose protagonist works in a sausage factory – but they no longer represented the exploited and humiliated worker, who was instead portrayed in other work contexts and in different roles. Thus, for example, in *La nostra vita* (Daniele Luchetti, 2010), the protagonist is a labourer who, after the death of his wife, becomes a boss in order to provide his children with the prosperity he had always lacked, also accepting irregularities, compromises and shortcuts that, for the director, were those of the entire country. Or, again, one could mention some of the films of Paolo Virzì, who in *Baci e abbracci* (1999) recounted a failed attempt to 'become an entrepreneur' of an ostrich farm, and in *Tutta la vita davanti* (2008) described employment in call centres. Clearly, in the latter film, Virzì wanted to tell the story of the newly exploited, so much so as to model the film's poster on Pelizza da Volpedo's painting *Il Quarto Stato*. The film described, with a tone inspired by Italian-style comedy, the prototype of the new jobs of the twenty-first century and an organisation in which individualism was

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exalted and where no collective response seemed possible in the face of oppressive working conditions.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the cinema also began to record growing job insecurity, one of the most evident consequences of the rise of neoliberalism and the transformation of the market. From *Santa Maradona* (Marco Ponti, 2001) to *Generazione mille euro* (Massimo Venier, 2009), *Scusate se esisto* (Riccardo Milani, 2014), *Gli ultimi saranno ultimi* (Massimo Bruno, 2015), *Tutti i santi giorni* (Paolo Virzì, 2012) and *The Pills. Sempre meglio che lavorare* (Luca Vecchi, 2016), many were the films that described job insecurity, both work-related and existential, in a more or less direct way.

In the 1980s, the concept of work embraced flexibility, associating it with freedom and autonomy. This perspective aimed at creating a less restrictive job market through deregulation and fostering employment. However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, the word *flexibility* would be replaced by *job insecurity*. A public narrative emerged, predominantly highlighting the risks and failures associated with this shift (Accornero 2007; Standing 2012). Thus, while in the scientific literature Richard Sennet (2019) warned against the social and psychological consequences of the *flexible man* and Luciano Gallino (2001) denounced the 'human costs of flexibility', in the public sphere a representation of job insecurity (casual work) began to emerge thanks, for example, to the invention of the May Day Parade of 2001 or the creation of San Precario in 2004. That same year, the May Day Parade saw the participation of no fewer than 100,000 people and was transformed into a European demonstration, Euro May Day, which ended up being staged in 22 cities in 2006. In 2006, bookshops were filled with novels on job insecurity, by numerous authors including Aldo Nove, Andrea Bajani, Michela Murgia, Antonio Incorvaia and Alessandro Rimassa.

Two of these books inspired films: namely, the eponymous *Generazione mille euro* and *Tutta la vita davanti*, both of which have been previously mentioned. This transmediality extended beyond cinema to include songs, from artists like Frankie Hi Nrg and Daniele Silvestri, and was a sign of how much the theme was sinking into the collective imagination. In short, mass culture was devoting increasing attention to job insecurity, understood more as an existential condition than as work, even if at times there were jobs that seemed to symbolise it. Such is the case of the so-called riders, to whom two films have recently been dedicated: *E noi come s*****i rimanemmo a guardare* (Pif, 2021) and *Una notte da dottore* (Guido Chiesa, 2021). The podcast entitled *Rider nella notte* (Diego Cajelli, 2021, 11 episodes) also focuses on this sector.

All these materials seemed almost a response to what the sociologist Andrea Tiddi wrote in the early 2000s: 'a spectre roams the globe, the spectre of job insecurity. And spectre it really is, because it seems that no one can or wants to recount its physiognomy.' This representability deficit, he continued, was linked to the extreme 'singularity ... heterogeneity and variability' of the 'subjects of job insecurity' and to the fact that their work relationships were private and totally individualised (Tiddi 2002, 7, 29). What was missing, in short, was a collective identity, given neither by work as such, nor by solidarity between workers, and even less by the trade unions. And, in fact, it does not seem to be a coincidence that, even more than work as such, trade unions and the collective dimension of work have been missing from media representations of recent years. And while television productions have often gone in search of exemplary figures from the past that say little about collective processes and that appear ultimately consolatory because they are based on nostalgia,[3] in those rare films like *Tutta la vita davanti*, where trade unionists are present, their characters seem to condense all the distance between the contemporary worker and the traditional model of the working class. Particularly significant in this sense was Gad Lerner's six-part television documentary entitled *Operai*, which between May and June 2017, 30 years after the book of the same name, returned

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to recount 'a social class as numerous as it is invisible', as he said in the first episode. Although starting again from Fiat, as in the 1988 book, in the television story the workers could no longer be narrated starting from a place of construction of collective identity, because workplaces no longer had that function. Thus, despite speaking of 'class', Lerner was unable to narrate the workers as a collective subject but only through many individual stories.

The last shall be the last

In this new phase, women were taking on a lead role, unlike what had happened until then. Think, for instance, of some of the films already mentioned, such as *Tutta la vita davanti*, *Scusate se esisto* or *Gli ultimi saranno gli ultimi*. And yet this unprecedented protagonism seemed due above all to the fact that women appeared to embody all the contradictions of the new work models, as if the aberrations of twenty-first-century work ended up being condensed in them, despite growing legislative protection and a new widespread sensitivity.

Take, for example, *Gli ultimi saranno gli ultimi* that, based on a play, is a film on the life of a textile worker, the only source of income for the family, who is fired because she is pregnant and therefore has to make do with temporary work. After a dramatic crescendo, the film closes with a happy ending: the baby is born, the unemployed husband finds a job and the protagonist finally seems fulfilled in her new role as mother. All in all, a consoling ending, suitable for a social comedy for families; however, it confirms how much the 'reassuring' model of the male breadwinner still prevails in Italy in the twenty-first century, despite laws protecting women's work and a growth in women's employment (Pescarolo 2019, 334).

In any case, in recent decades, the Italian cinema seems to have rediscovered a capacity for social denunciation, and not only through comedies, which are the most popular genre. Take a film like *Sole Cuore Amore* (Daniele Vicari, 2016), which, in realistic tones, tells the story of a young woman, mother of three children, who wakes up before dawn every day to go to work and faces a two-hour journey until she literally dies of fatigue. The director was adept at overcoming one of the typical limitations of films about work, telling the story of daily routines, and was very effective at denouncing simply by showing, without falling into the traps of rhetoric or pathos. But there is more: being centred on commuting, *Sole Cuore Amore* recalls *Pelle viva*, one of the films of the 1960s that portrayed the worker as the victim of the economic miracle. In this case, too, the worker was depicted as the one who pays a cost, albeit no longer that of the economic boom but that of the crisis in and loss of any form of social protection. Moreover, in this way another of the typical traits of post-industrial work was highlighted: the evaporation of the boundaries between working and living times. This was a situation that had long been proclaimed desirable, a conquest of flexibility capable of freeing the worker – and above all the female worker – from the rigidity of Fordist production and which, instead, ended up being reversed into its opposite, into a continuous time (however fragmented) in which life and work are inseparable. As in the past, however, this new image of the worker was not univocal: while female workers were represented as the encapsulation of the distortions of labour in the twenty-first century, they could also express a new collective subject. Take, for instance, Michele Placido's film *Sette minuti* (2016), it too based on a play (Massini 2015). Both texts were capable, on the one hand, of investigating factory reality without hiding the tensions that ran through it – ethnic and generational, cultural and gender-based – but also, on the other, of describing its capacity to recompose itself, overcoming individualities, at a time when the possibility of an erosion of minimum rights was appearing. And yet one cannot overlook the fact that the factory depicted in this film

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was in the process of being sold to a multinational company, and that by defending their rights those workers risked having their production relocated. Although the film was on the side of the workers, the scenario was that of the exchange between work and rights, and, therefore, of a condition of overall marginality and backwardness – confirmed, moreover, by employment data. Ultimately, therefore, the way in which work was recounted confirmed how it was no longer at the centre of the Italian imagination, despite the fact that in the 2000s some tragedies – from ThyssenKrupp to the death of Luana D'Orazio – and some conflicts – from the complex issue of Ilva in Taranto to GKN in Campi Bisenzio near Florence – had brought it back to the attention of public opinion. And without the imagery of workers, as Alberto Prunetti, narrator of the working class, noted about the GKN affair, the labour issue would have remained residual, an expression of a country that is now post-industrial (Prunetti 2021).

Conclusion

This article has described how media representations of work and workers – especially in cinema and television – have changed from the 1960s to the early decades of the twenty-first century and their impact on the gendering of work. It showed how, in more than half a century, work has progressively lost its ability to define identities, both individual and collective, and how, as a consequence, media representations of workers have become rarefied. The visual media have always had difficulty in representing work, and in particular the daily routine of production activities. Over recent decades, the prevalence of workers in the service sector, to the detriment of blue-collar workers, whose numbers have dropped not only because of a contraction in employment but also due to increasingly frequent delocalisation, has made cinematic representations of industrial work and blue-collar worlds increasingly rare.

As we have seen, the representation of blue-collar workers seems to have followed a circular path: in the 1960s and in the early decades of the present century, industrial workers have been portrayed as victims – in the films of the 1960s as being exploited, as those who paid the highest costs of economic progress in the boom years, and, in the works of recent decades, as the ones who continue to suffer more than other social groups as a result of the economic and social crisis. And yet, a significant difference exists between the two representations. While in the films of the 1960s, the protagonists were generally men, in the first two decades of the new century, the lead roles are often played by female workers. It is a sign of the growing importance of female labour, but, at the same time, an indication that women continue to be regarded as marginalised in the world of work. In the new millennium, all the fragilities of employed manual labour were condensed in women, to the point of turning them into the symbol of the crisis of the working world. They also embody the inequalities and uncertainties of today's societies.

The article has shown the circular relationship existing between the dynamics of the working world and its representation. In fact, during the phase in which 'blue-collar workers played a central role' in Italian society in the 1970s, we saw an increase in the number of films and television programmes dedicated to recounting the industrial workers' world. These did not limit themselves to stories within an industrial work context, but endeavoured to investigate those environments and, through them, the contradictions and tensions of a collective social subject, the working class, which in that period was perceived as a possible protagonist of social change. At the same time, however, we were able to notice how much those films succeeded in highlighting the uncertainties of the working-class concept itself, bringing out the individual dimension of the protagonists

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and ending up questioning the stereotype of the monolithic and revolutionary working class, then common to many political cultures.

On the other hand, the ability to look at social reality and the profound changes that society was undergoing, an approach that characterises a good part of the film production of the 1960s and 1970s, allowed visual media to grasp in good time – even if sometimes unintentionally – the crisis affecting the central role of the working class and point to the emergence of other types of work, such as clerical work and then, several years later, 'precarious' work. In the 2000s, it was precisely the absence of a stable job that became the defining element of identity, with a series of films that recounted the bewilderment of a generation starting from occupational precariousness.

Finally, the article has demonstrated the importance of media representations in broadening and articulating the portrayal of a social subject and their influence on the collective imagination. The study of media representations and their evolution can help us understand cultural processes that originate in the political-economic sphere and have the power to deeply modify a country's social and cultural landscape and its self-representation. It is to be hoped, therefore, that Italian historiography will pay greater attention to these topics and to visual sources in the future, expanding the (little) research that has been carried out in this field in the direction of the analysis of professions, such as clerical workers, or precarious employment. The latter could prove to be effective prisms through which to view the changes that have occurred in Italian society over the last half-century.

Notes

1. The hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the staging of a play inspired by Pirro and Petri's script in 2018 (Di Paolo 2018).
2. The reports were: 'La libertà in fabbrica' (28 March 1969), 'Gli operai e il 2000' (28 November 1968), 'La chiesa e il mondo operaio' (3 January 1969), 'Potere in fabbrica' (28 November 1969) and 'La fine dell'autunno' (26 December 1969).
3. One example in particular is *Pane e libertà – Giuseppe Di Vittorio* (Alberto Negrin, 2008) aired on Rai Uno on 15 and 16 March 2009.

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Italian summary

L'articolo ricostruisce le rappresentazioni mediali – e nello specifico quelle visuali, cinematografica e televisiva – del lavoro industriale in Italia dagli anni Sessanta del Novecento al primo ventennio del XXI secolo. L'obiettivo dell'articolo non è tanto analizzare il modo in cui i processi lavorativi sono stati descritti, ma indagare le rappresentazioni di genere del lavoro e se e come la rappresentazione del lavoro (e dei lavori) sia stata una chiave per raccontare la società italiana e le sue aporie. In questo senso, l'articolo presta attenzione anche a ciò che non viene rappresentato, considerando l'assenza del lavoro tanto significativa quanto la sua presenza. Particolarmente importante, da questo punto di vista, è la rappresentazione del lavoro femminile, molto meno diffusa di quello maschile, alla quale viene dedicata un'attenzione specifica.

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