

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Bitter Rice 1949

Giuseppe de Santis 1907-1996

STORY

Giuseppe de Santis studied literature and philosophy, during the second world War, and took from his experiences of that time a lasting hatred of Fascism, and a commitment to the Communist Party. He was early drawn to the cinematographic moves of Italian Neo-realism, which addressed itself to the miserable condition of working men and woman after the tragic destruction brought down on Italy by the second World War. The agricultural sector in the north of the country was hit especially hard by military destruction, and the film before us is set inside one particularly important part of the Italian—as of the Viet Nameese, Chinese, and Indian--economies; the rice producing sector.

Development. The film opens as the trains are departing for the Po Valley, carrying with them the rice workers for that year's planting and harvesting. (These workers—who were all female-- were drawn from the poorest strata of Italian society, and were paid notoriously low wages for work which was exhausting and unhealthful; most of it done in a bending or squatting position, in the rice paddies with water up to the calf. Housing for the *mondine*, rice cleaners, was a rough barracks, and the conditions of hygiene and nourishment were rudimentary; de Santis was throughout the film speaking for elemental rights of a group which was in need of national attention.) As loud speakers announce the launching forth of the annual spring planting, and as we watch the women thundering forward to get seats on the trains, another episode is unfolding. A theft of jewels has just taken place, and the pair of thieves (Walter and Francesca) fit themselves into a corner seat on the train, in the midst of the turmoil of women workers. By the time this pair have reached the train's work destination, they have split, to form two new couples: Walter has sweet talked Silvana into working with him to steal from the rice harvest. The outsized figure of Silvana thus steps to center stage in the film.

Rice. The bulk of the film, from this point on, follows the sociology, enriching our understanding of the peculiar labor conditions surrounding the women of this annual rice drive; studying the evils of Walter and Silvana, who proceed with their plans to steal a large portion of the rice harvest; and then tracking the awakening and ultimate self-destruction of Silvana herself.

Sociology. Italian neo realism is no stranger to the social facts on the ground. This is the tradition from which Fellini brought forth, in a contemporaneous film like *The Bicycle Thief*, 1949, the misery of the little guy on the streets of a city wiped out by internal destruction, and turned into a wasteland. This is a moment in which the makers of film considered and actualized the plausibility of using people off the streets as actors. It is a time when Film Directors—who were also on their way to becoming (Fassbinder, Herzog) social journalists—were coming to the front of society, drawing attention to burning social issues. The issue of social conflict, between the authorized rice workers and the *immigrantes*, undocumented (for this job) though they were, was blazing in the Italian north as two sides, fierily in conflict, are here depicted fighting for a hellish source of livelihood..

Criminals. Walter and Silvana are cold blooded criminals, as they plan to steal parts of the rice harvest, while working from within the rice barracks work community. Walter is a dangerous charmer, with no interest in the plight of the women workers, and holds Silvana under his power, as he has since he peeled her off from Francesca at the end of their train ride north.

Silvana. Silvana is something else, and even in her evil remains a central figure in the life of the workers—of whom she is simply one. She boogie-woogies a lot in the midst and to the delight of her often participating coworkers. (Can she ever shake those boobs!). She smokes trendy perfumed Italian cigarettes, *fumetti*. She flirts like a doe in heat. She reads pulpy romances, sprudels Hollywood film stories, and plays to the American style of the moment, the style Fassbinder and Wenders play with in

attempting to characterize German efforts a decade or two later to respond to the heat of the American style. It is from her basic humanity that Silvana draws the power to free herself from her psychological bondage to Walter. Ultimately horrified, to realize that he has been conspiring against her colleagues, Silvana pulls out a gun and shoots Walter dead. In doing so she becomes a kind of heroine to her team. To herself however she continues to be a tragic failure, a self-perceived viciousness which she expunges in the only way she knows, by throwing herself off a watchtower.

Ritual. After the suicide of Silvana her fellow workers, who are also finishing their work in the fields, pass in procession beside her corpse, sprinkling on it rice grains, a sign of respect and love. It is not the first time in the film we have thought of archaic rituals. The rice-working women, whom we follow in the paddies, shortly after their arrival in the north, work calf deep in water, at least eight hours (frequently more) per day. While working they learn from the constantly blaring loudspeakers, that they must not talk to one another as they work. There fore they turn to collective singing; chorusing forth their complaints, disgusts, refusals, and insults targeting management. They create ritual sing song collective music which expresses them and is invulnerable to the bosses' interventions. To which we can add the operatic elements of the film—right up to the suicide of Silvana, which shadows the death of Tosca from the top of the guard tower in Puccini's *Tosca*, an unmistakable bell ringing in the background of the film.

THEMES

Oppression The women rice workers desperately need the money they make during the annual six week rice harvest. But in the course of their work they are treated like farm animals and seriously underpaid.

Sexuality There is an abundance of hot house sexuality in the barracks where the women stay. The presence of a nearby military bases guarantees that women with busts will make as many conquests as they like.

Squalor The living conditions, in the women's barracks—everywhere, beginning with the cattle car trains that transport the women north—are lamentable.

Melodrama The visual-verbal mode, of the entire film, is operatic and gestural. When the workers protest it is in operatic unison; when Silvana kills it is with proper operatic flamboyance.

CHARACTERS

Silvana is the most flamboyant and visible figure, who, though for some time she has been betraying her own colleagues, under the influence of Walter, finally realizes what he has been doing; she kills her vicious boyfriend.

Walter is the criminal villain of the film. He manipulates Silvana into loathsome behavior, and he not only steals rice but plots for much wider theft of the year's crop. From the beginning we know him as a useless but charming no good.

Marco is the upstanding proletarian military office with whom Francesca, Silvana's initial traveling partner, pairs up after the workers arrive in the north.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SILVANA

Character Silvana is the central, unforgettable figure in this film. There are several reasons. Her super busty outfits—which put the Legion of Decency at her heels—attract eyes at every turn. Her change of heart, in realizing the hatefulness of Walter, and acting accordingly, makes her a kind of moral hero, though she must get there by murder. Finally, she is a cross cultural example of the ‘American’ influence of the time, and as such evokes a unique historical pathos.

Parallels. One direction of thought takes us to the world of John Steinbeck, especially in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), in which he drives his fictional eye deep into the American movement West, in search of work, during the Dust Bowl desolation of the thirties. Steinbeck captures the helplessness of the economic victim. There is the turn of the century work done by Zola or the Goncourt brothers in France, or by Upton Sinclair in the United States; writer sociologists who penetrated factory life with a fearlessness previous undared.

Illustrative moments.

Dancing. The archetypal scene of Silvana in action shows her Boogie-woogie ing across the workers’ central barracks room, gathering and inspiring plenty of attention.

Crowding. Silvana is very much a woman of the people. We first meet here as she is struggling to get any kind of seat, in the overcrowded train heading north to the rice fields.

Shooting. Silvana finds she can shoot, as she discovers the enormity of the duperie Walter has pulled on her. She shoots him dead.

Leaping. Silvana leaps to her death, killing herself for all her betrayal of her colleagues, and of what they have been struggling through together.

Discussion questions

De Santis opens the film with a report from reporters, on the annual hegira to the north. In other words, the Director brings on the event as part of ‘public news.’ What happens to that element of the film, which suggests that one part of the film will be public perception of the events in it? Is there in De Santis’ direction any subtle examination, as in Godard, of the role the film industry or the camera play in the creation of this film?

Has the director adequate control of group psychology here? Does he convince you, in his sidebar questioning for example, that he has made group psychology part of his understanding process?