

Nostalgia for Fathers: Fatherly Figures in Contemporary Italian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The essay aims to highlight the ability of contemporary Italian cinema to give shape to an unconscious and collective nostalgia, that is the nostalgia of the fathers. A psychological approach shows how it is in the wake of the lack of the father that Italian cinema gives us iconic images of the process of differentiation of the child's desire that, although can affect different moments of the biological life of the individual, represents the transition from childhood to adulthood. By retracing some recent works and analyzing the father figure in relation to the role he has in the son's life, the essay aims to bring to light the different outcomes of such process of differentiation in relation to the cinematographic structures that can narrate it (the tragic and comic-romance models, the serial structure)

Parole-chiave. Contemporary Italian Cinema; Fatherhood; Children; Nostalgia

Il saggio intende mettere in luce la capacità del cinema italiano contemporaneo di dare forma a una nostalgia inconscia e collettiva, ovvero la nostalgia dei padri. Un approccio psicanalitico mostra come sia sulla scia della mancanza del padre che il cinema italiano ci consegna immagini iconiche del processo di differenziazione del desiderio infantile che, pur potendo interessare momenti diversi della vita biologica dell'individuo, rappresenta il passaggio dall'infanzia all'età adulta. Ripercorrendo alcune opere recenti e analizzando la figura del padre in relazione al ruolo che ha nella vita del figlio, il saggio intende mettere in luce i diversi esiti di tale processo di differenziazione in relazione alle strutture cinematografiche che possono raccontarlo (i modelli tragico e comico-romantico, la struttura seriale).

Keywords. Cinema italiano contemporaneo; Paternità; Figli; Nostalgia

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*It was the father to generate me,
your daughter only delivered me.
She was like a ploughed field,
that collects the seed spread by the Others.
If the father misses, there wouldn't be any children.*

Euripide, *Oreste*

If we examine productions released over the last few years, there is a particular aspect that prevails throughout recent Italian movies: the unwieldy father's presence, and that presence's transformation into absence. Keeping in mind that a woman, a group of people or a single person can also be considered a fatherly figure, here we describe that role by simply using the word 'father'. This will not only describe the figure throughout the work, but also will be used to discuss the psychical principle, the symbol that refers to the collective consciousness and the cultural context in which we live. In recent Italian cinema, the father's presence permeates the screen, whether one points out the father-son relationship or the father-man duality linked to the father's function, or whether the father is absent, irresponsible, narcissistic or maternal. It is the urgency of their condition that ignites the narration, and, frequently, their problematic aspects emerge even when their character's importance is secondary.

My aim is to review different types of fathers in order to understand which of them are preferred on the big screen, as well as which narrative forms (comedy, drama or romance) in which Italian cinema portrays varieties of the same character while making itself a collective tale of the common (subconscious) sense. In accordance with one of Luigi Zoja's most important studies on the father figure¹, I am attempting not to dismiss² the father's role, but to consider that even though a father's authority has these days become less strict, and his power weaker, the Western patriarchal collective subconscious has not succeeded in

¹ Cfr. L. ZOJA, *Il gesto di Ettore. Preistoria, storia, attualità e scomparsa del padre*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2016.

² Cfr. M. RECALCATI, *Cosa resta del padre? La paternità nell'epoca ipermoderna*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2011. On the representation of male identity in Italian cinema, cfr. A.B. SAPONARI, F. ZECCA, *Oltre l'inetto. Rappresentazioni plurali della mascolinità nel cinema italiano*, Meltemi, Sesto San Giovanni 2021.

eradicating across a few generations what has dominated it for centuries³. There is still a quest for the father, and for this reason cinema creates a representation of his absence by displaying a collective subconscious nostalgia for the figure of the father.

In this article we will examine some Italian films from 2017, a year chosen as a sample because it is particularly useful for reflecting on the perspective adopted (the father-child relationship) in Italian cinema. The films chosen include good examples of some types: the absent father (who gives us the cinematic image of an unfinished childhood), the father-master (from which the image of children understood to be property derives), the father-godfather (hence the problem of the paternal inheritance) and, finally, the nostalgia for the father (hence the return of the son to the father).

The Absent Father

Let us start by comparing three movies: *A Ciambra* by Jonas Carpignano, *Cuori puri* by Roberto De Paolis, and *L'intrusa* by Leonardo Di Costanzo. By taking the father's point of view, which leads to observing things from his exact or supposed angle, we see that *L'intrusa* narrates the story of a little girl who, in order to be welcomed in a new community (a children's shelter), must confront the feeling of shame that her father causes her for being a Mafia member arrested at the beginning of the movie. Meanwhile, *A Ciambra* is the story of a boy who, after losing his father (he is arrested too), has to become an adult – thus forgoing childish amusements – to be able to enter the old ones' clan (the ending sequence), and *Cuori puri* tells the story of two adolescents who have to build up a new bond (sexual and romantic) by freeing themselves from their original families. Agnese detaches herself both from her mother (who would like her to be candid) and from a priest (who aspires to guide her), whereas Stefano moves away from a mother whom he has to look after, replacing his father, whom he likely wants to disregard (this is part of the dishonourable father category that appeared from the nineteenth century onwards)⁴.

³ In Western society, the image of the father is one of the most articulated and complex. It is rooted in Greek myths, then in Roman law, later modified by Christianity's events, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution.

⁴ Cfr. ZOJA, *Il gesto di Ettore*, cit., pp. 201-240.

These three stories are related to the need for initiation stressed by Henderson⁵ that is typical of modern societies, such as the urge to acquire a new identity once the male child, or the incomplete being, dies and then is reborn. The issue becomes complicated in the moment when, like in these cinematographic examples, the initiation process is not guided by someone but is experienced by the character themselves. This always involves someone paying the price for a betrayal: in *L'intrusa*, Rita has to leave her home (she flees the shelter in which she and mother Maria were hosts) for the sake of granting the restoration of the new order, establishing her new homeland elsewhere; in *A Ciambra*, Pio is forced to betray a brotherly feeling of friendship that he has towards the African boy who, in a father-like way, helped him; in *Cuori puri*, Agnese has to betray her mother, who, in the absence of her father, takes on both his educational traits (teaching her how to drive) and censorious ones (forbidding her from using a mobile phone and from having sex). Moreover, *Cuori puri* features Agnes betraying her father's substitute and being warned «You must obey the Father, but also your mother», by Don Luca. Most importantly, she has to turn against herself and her alleged chastity.

The three movies are more original because they boldly combine neorealist imagery (the outskirts in *Cuori puri*, the Romani neighbourhood in *A Ciambra*, the shelter in *L'intrusa*), Hollywood narrative forms (the action model in Carpignano) and documentary cinema (the Di Costanzo documentary-style glance) to end up within the fictional tale genre (the difficulty of experimenting with a pure relationship – in the sociological sense meant by Giddens⁶ – between Agnese and Stefano in *Cuori puri*).

To avoid a misunderstanding that could relegate the maternal only to the biological or the instinctive aspects, we may assume that while the mother's role may be a biological matter in the first place while also being cultural; the father's role, on the other hand, is undeniably social. A father is expected to teach his son how to function in society, just like his mother taught him to be in his own body (in Greek the words father and homeland share the same radix, as do

⁵ Cf. J.L. HENDERSON, *Thresholds of Initiation*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 1967.

⁶ Cfr. A. GIDDENS, *La trasformazione dell'intimità. Sessualità, amore ed erotismo nelle società moderne*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1995.

mother and matter in Latin). A father represents willingness, order and purpose in life, promoting growth, autonomy and differentiation: the son's actions and his mind unfolding⁷. For this reason, throughout history the father figure has played a fundamental role in children's life stages up until adulthood. As Italian cinema shows, the father's absence during this fragile period can lead to a constitutive feeling of incompleteness or can make a child gain wholeness only after they have paid a high price; nevertheless, this same completeness will always be marked with their own incompleteness (the betrayal in *A Ciambra*, the missed promise in *Cuori puri*, the flee in *L'intrusa*).

The Master-Father

Despite becoming the breadwinner or the salary hunter⁸ during the great transformation of the 20th century, the father is still missing – he is no longer present. This has not only led to the transition from one function to another, but also caused shifting existential levels, referring to the philosophical revolution named after the death of God. At first, the father was conceived as a spiritual and metaphysical being, but at that point he was materialistic, looking after his children only by providing them with material support. After this transformation, the father did not represent the Father anymore; instead, he was involved in a terrestrial competition with other fathers, mothers, even his children. In this way, he no longer embodies high moral values; conversely, he represents everyday economic standards.

A relevant example of the breadwinner-father appears in another film shot in 2017, *Il Cratere*, a documentary by Silvia Luzi and Luca Bellino. This movie, openly at the crossroads between fiction and reality (i.e. it opens with a lecture on realism and naturalism given by Sharon in front of a mirror), recalls in multiple ways the neomelodic hues (more circus-like than fairy-like) present in *Indivisibili* (Eduardo De Angelis, 2016), written by Guaglianone. Above all, however, both movies focus on the father-daughter (or daughters, like in *Indivisibili*) relationship, which keeps parents symbiotically tied to their children, thus hindering their emancipation. The fathers eagerly devour their children's lives. Both Rosario in

⁷ Cf. A. SAMUELS, *The Political Psyche*, Routledge, London 1993.

⁸ Cfr. ZOJA, *Il gesto di Ettore*, cit., pp. 295-304.

Il Cratere and Pippo in *Indivisibili* are willing to exploit their daughters' gifts, in both cases their singing skills, suffocating their daughters' voices in the world through their actions.

To lose one's own voice – Sharon fails to sing during a recording session – means to lose contact with the world: «She acts like when she is at school: you talk and talk but she doesn't hear you», says her brother to the father when Sharon seems to be unbothered by his constant harassment. «I wish you would bring me satisfaction like Fortuna does to his father». When the family devotedly meet around the table at dinner time, everyone watches the young Fortuna singing on television, the children fascinated by the icon which represents the symbol of their neomelodic fantasies. On the other hand, the father degrades the value of that symbol into a matter of economic worth: while seated at the head of the table he distributes hallowed orders rather than giving bread and advice («You must start working», he tells one son; «You better step up», he urges the other). Indeed, Sharon's dream becomes the spasmodic father's claim, since he is obsessed with the idea that, through her success, he will be able to redeem his life's sacrifices, like roaming the town's festivals with his walking stand.

This parental figure, who denies his children the fulfilment of their dreams and desires, hindering their lives while projecting onto them his own, is best known in Latin culture as *senex iratus*. He certainly does not constitute an innovation in Italian cinema; in fact, Eduardo De Filippo's gloomy comedies in the 1950s staged the «expropriation of desires» as the «ambitious elders' purpose to orientate youth's destiny»⁹. But while in *Ragazze da marito* (1952) the father blame the girl's mother for perpetuating her parents' mistakes – «You're acting with them the same way your parents did with you» – in *Il Cratere* it is the mother who comforts Sharon when she cries because of her father: «I know what it feels like. I went through it too», she says. Where in the 1950s the parent took advantage of the son to witness the accomplishment of frustrated ambitions (e.g. better employment, a prestigious union with a wealthy family), contemporary cinema shows us instead a parent who consumes himself, his children and the entire family in order to gain success and exposure related to an instant profit rather than

⁹ R. DE GAETANO, *Amore*, in *Lessico del cinema italiano. Forme di rappresentazione e forme di vita*, a cura di R. De Gaetano, vol. I, Mimesis, Milano 2014, p. 68. Cfr. L. ROMANO, *Il padre e la costruzione di una nuova identità genitoriale nell'Italia degli anni Cinquanta*, in «Quaderni di Intercultura», 2016.

aiming at an economically driven vision of the future. Still, the father's prerogative is to have a plan that shapes itself according to the time and the willingness to postpone any need.

Rosario Caroccia does not want to raise money for his daughter; on the contrary, he wants to profit from his daughter by asking his whole family to sacrifice and to work harder in order to buy a special song's copyright that talks about him. The lyrics to this song feature the line «There's no one like the father, he's sung in a song, he's the first love», and its title is *O Silenzio del Cuore – The Silence of the Heart*. It pleads «not to abandon one's own children and not to leave the family», because we all are someone's children, a concept that echoes in «Tutt'eguale song 'e creature» (Neapolitan dialect for «all children are equals») by Enzo Avitabile, which plays in *Indivisibili*.

Therefore, the daughter lends her voice to her father's words. Her dream to succeed in life becomes her father's obsession for profit, and her desire equals his attempt at redemption, which Sharon strongly fights, becoming mute or even screaming at times. When the dream comes true, we see through Rosario's first-person shot (the only one in the movie) Sharon on the stage while Rosario continues filming her with his phone camera: the steady close-up that we see is highlighted by glossy cinematography and a muffled sound recording of Sharon's voice from afar. What happens in this sequence is because Rosario's gaze lacks what Luigi Zoja calls the essential father's gaze: «The father's gaze goes beyond the instant/moment and constitutes time. So, to look forward means having a plan, to look backward gives a meaning to what already happened: in the past, plan becomes memory»¹⁰. Since Rosario is not able to use his gaze as a creative tool, he uses it only to trap or to hold his daughter captive as if controlling her through surveillance cameras. He does not offer his time to his children, but watches over it.

Rosario is an overbearing father/master-father who aims to absorb his children's lives to carry out his unsatisfied and unsatisfiable narcissistic desire. He is a father who is unable to hand down his moral values or teach anything – «I can't explain to you how to make it». After the father's myth overturns, Rosario's relationship with his children appears to be completely unbalanced: he has nothing

¹⁰ ZOJA, *Il Gesto di Ettore*, cit., p. 259.

to give but only to take from his children.

Like the ending of *Indivisibili*, where the sisters secede (after finding the money for the operation), Luzi and Bellino's final scene follows Sharon, who leaves after opening the yard door while being obsessively spied upon by her father's security cameras (whose acoustic signal sounds like a flat encephalogram that juxtaposes with Rosario's numb face).

Whilst *Indivisibili*'s power resides in the sisters' need to physically secede in order to symbolically part from their father, in *Il Cratere* the father–daughter relationship is much more impactful if we consider that they are also father and daughter in reality. Rosario is a screenwriter – he wrote this movie as well – so he is also a father who rewrote the story (maybe his) as a father: a parable of a master-father who, with a certain view of success, must be either the boss of the family or a charismatic leader. In fact, only as a role model can he pass on his values (his son emulates him), while the master's figure merely gives orders that the son obeys.

In both movies' endings, they are not fathers who learn to love unconditionally and to give room to their children's desires; their children are the ones who free their fathers from the burden of being limitlessly responsible for their role without any ownership right. Despite what it seems, the main character of the plot is not Abram the father, but Isaac the son. As it is written in scripture, it is the father to be sacrificed, not the son: «God is the symbolic Other who demands every father to relinquish the ownership over the sons they fathered»¹¹ because in order to break the son–parents tie, it is essential to know how to let sons go. If the son stayed with his parents – especially if they repress their son's freedom – he would not be able to shape life on his own. Thus, if the father will not be sacrificed for his son, it will be the son who sacrifices the father. This is what Sharon does when she abandons her mother and family to flee from the fatherly prison, as well as Viola and Daisy when they secede to sever the relationship with their father.

¹¹ M. RECALCATI, *Il segreto del figlio. Da Edipo al figlio ritrovato*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2017, p. 85.

The Father-Godfather

While the mother is only judged by how she raises her sons, the father is scrutinised both for how he acts with his son and for how he behaves in society, as his role is manifestly social. In other words, the father has a duty to teach the son to establish relationships outside of the family circle. Because social relationships are composed also of pure toughness, as well as love and justice, sometimes the father better gives the winner's example. In myth, the father wins not simply because he rules the household or the *oikos*, but mostly because he leaves it to go to war and then fights to return, combining for the journey his instinct, adventurous spirit and the need to return. Therefore, the warrior transforms into the hero who knows how to hold together the feeling of belonging and the spirit of wandering. Like Ulysses, who returns home after 20 long years after using his humbleness (he disguises as homeless) and his patience (his project takes plenty of time), he succeeds at a stroke in freeing his homeland from the suitors, reinstalling his roots in the wood-carved bed of Penelope and, above all, impeding Telemachus to win «the glorious father's battle»¹². This is because «according to the symbols code, if the son won, the match would end too early, and the inner rival would survive untouched»¹³. In myth, the father's presence is now necessary (considered as his return) for the accomplishment of the telemachia: «If what the mortals' desire could come true, I would my father return»¹⁴, says Telemachus in *The Odyssey*.

Beyond archetypes, modern statistics also state that a major consequence of the father's absence is family misery¹⁵. The latest fatherless Italian cinema set on the Italian outskirts (mostly the Roman and Neapolitan) gives credit to this¹⁶. In Italy, this is remarkably more evident in the Southern regions, which are eco-

¹² Cf. HOMER, *The Odyssey*, XVII, vv. 290-327.

¹³ ZOJA, *Il gesto di Ettore*, cit., p. 125.

¹⁴ HOMER, *The Odyssey*, XVI, v. 148.

¹⁵ This seems to be accurate for America and part of Europe. In the Nordic countries, the father's absence is quite widespread but is not related to misery, cf. S. COONTZ, *The Way We Really Are. Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*, Basic Books, New York 1997.

¹⁶ A further example, on which it is not possible to dwell here, is given in Dario Albertini's debut film, *Manuel* (2017), a profound portrait of a fatherless boy from the outskirts who struggles with his life-imprisoned mother. At the end of the training journey that the movie takes, the boy has to give back a real portrait to a painter in the final scene.

nomically further from modernity and see frequent psychological problems related to fatherhood. This phenomenon is proven, but a mother's disproportionate accountability in meridional Italy and the presence of criminal organisations like the Mafia, where groups of men deem themselves to be powerful, «ignore the ancient conquerors by their ancestors like the effort represented by civilization and with integrity»¹⁷, from the father to the godfather.

To ignore the father's chain by destroying the mythical image of Enea, who runs away from the burning Troy while holding his son Astianatte's hand and carrying his father, Anchise, on his shoulders, means that the godfather can be taken out anytime.

This is what happens to the boss Pietro Savastano in *Gomorra*'s last episode of its second season (*Gomorra*, Roberto Saviano, Sky Atlantic-Sky Cinema 1, TV8, 2014-2021). Before assuming the traits of the Cain and Abel story, *Gomorra* is indeed the story in which Cain kills Adam. The vertical father-son clash (Genny and Pietro Savastano) against the orphan (Ciro di Marzio) transforms into a brotherly horizontal relationship: Genny and Ciro team up to kill Savastano's father. Genny kills his own father when, as seen through alternate editing, another Pietro makes him a father after coming into the world. «The brothers don't ally against their father to restore their horizontal alliance: just the opposite, they want to take his place, to be able to vertically ascend by overcoming any restriction. Theirs is a temporary and extemporary alliance. In the end their rivalry will probably violently burst out»¹⁸. If the anarchic tragedy chaos was solved, as the serial structure in which it resides suggests in the third season, it would not be for the return of the brothers' gang's wild masculinity, which is praised by futurists and attacked by Robert Bly¹⁹. But by dodging the risk of a perennial mothers' government (Imma, Scianel or, more dangerously, Patrizia), the patriarchal structure is reset for the stronger one, the new father Genny, to occupy the vacant position.

Because of historical and symbolic/psychological reasons that are settled in the collective subconscious, the father must be up to victory, and Genny's father is a winner (Savastano is the undisputed boss of Naples), but the bond that

¹⁷ ZOJA, *Il gesto di Ettore*, cit., p. 257.

¹⁸ R. DE GAETANO, *L'anarchia tragica*, in «Arabeschi», n. 9, 2017.

¹⁹ Cfr. R. BLY, *La società degli eterni adolescenti*, Red, Como 2000.

they have limits Genny's strength. Before being an heir, Genny wants to be a son first, and he repeatedly admonishes his father for his role. Genny wants to be acknowledged, but Pietro is not willing to do so, as he does not want to resign and pass down his plan to his son. Thus, the son denies the father and kills him. Moreover, he takes over his father's plan, which will not ever truly belong to him, since he does not inherit it straight from his father. In Lacan's opinion, one cannot be a righteous son after denying the father – «one can do without the father unless availing him»²⁰ – meaning that to overstep the father, as it should be in a son's life, one has to be able to exploit the father, to go beyond him rather than to take his place. Because the patriarchal model perpetuates itself without any variation, as we can observe from the last season's ending, there could not be a happy end, but only the violent death of both 'brothers'.

Don Vincenzo Strozzone is the dead godfather right in the very first scene (the funeral farce) in the camorra-style musical by the Manetti brothers, *Ammore e Malavita* (2017). In this case, too, Ciro and Rosario are two fatherless brothers (real and symbolic ones), two childhood friends raised under the authority of the same father/godfather. Of the 'two tigers', only Ciro has a warrior's sentimental strength, in addition to physical strength, and he succeeds, thanks to his love for Fatima, in betraying his childhood to access adulthood by building a new bond. Fatima embodies a contingency that reschedules the predetermined programme of destiny, repressing the love that humanises and softens the hero's roughness. By combining strength and tenderness (the fatherly qualities that, in Greek mythology, are chanted by Apollo), Ciro is ready to betray the godfather – «Who is betraying that usurer?» he says to Rosario, with the aim of facing the 'father's paradox', the real one that Zoja²¹ discusses: he is a figure who acts from within (the family), but at the same time he is also open to the outside (society). He must balance love and power, moral law and heroism. Despite Ciro's efforts, Don Vincenzo resembles *Gomorra*'s Don Pietro. He is an unaffectionate winner too (due to the power that he has): even though he adopted both sons, he does not feel anything for them (in fact, he does not hesitate to get rid of Ciro just because he suspects that Ciro would betray him).

²⁰ J. LACAN, *Il seminario. Libro XXIII. Il sinthomo (1975-1976)*, Astrolabio, Roma 2006, p. 133.

²¹ Cfr. ZOJA, *Il gesto di Ettore*, cit., p. 23.

Both sons in *Gomorrah* and *Ammore e Malavita* are the two models that the father/godfather allows to transmit: the warrior (Genny) on one side, and the hero (Ciro) on the other, violence and toughness. Therefore, on one side there is *Gomorrah's* tragic serial model, where it is only possible to inherit the fatherly model (Genny kills his father and then his brother Giro to inherit the traditional role); on the other side there is instead the comic opening which allows the son to renounce his inheritance (Ciro kills the brother who does not want to rebel against the father, thereby killing the part of him that wants to remain a child without accessing adulthood). This is the difference between comedy and tragedy: in *Ammore e Malavita* there are no blood ties (the only relative that could help Giro, his uncle, betrays him), and there are no heirs and no passing of the torch, but only new men. It is also the difference between Italian and American cinema, whose legacy is reflected more in *Gomorrah's* serial model than in the Manetti brothers' Neapolitan musical. American cinema always narrates man's transition into adulthood with difficulty, as the subject trapped by childishness that prevents the raising of new men. On the other hand, Italian cinema narrates the possibility of rebirth, even though it is paid for dearly. In other words, it narrates the dual movement of liberty (from the fatherly bond) and responsibility (for the father's inheritance management) which marks with the father's death (even if symbolic), the son's path and the differentiation process from the family circle.

One's own inheritance (genetic, material, symbolic) is not something that one passively receives, but is an assignment, a movement: legacy is not a relentless repetition (Genny replacing Don Pietro), but a subjective reconquest (Ciro after Don Vincenzo's passing begins a new life with Fatima). In fact, every true heir is also a heretic «because he doesn't limit itself to interpret the past as a mere repetition of what already happened, but he takes the past back and gives it a whole new meaning»²², thus fulfilling his own desire.

²² RECALCATI, *Il segreto del figlio*, cit., p. 32.

The Nostalgia for the Father

During a time of emptied myths, gestures have the autonomy of feelings, and images continue to possess the power of archetypes. When the father is absent, the son will turn to initiatory fatherly figures, such as mentors, who are assigned according to his story (priests, Mafia men, psychoanalysts)²³, or he will look for them, since to have a father or to be one implies a quest. Writers' and directors' creativity in the quest for fathers gives a voice to an unconscious nostalgia that also always means (as does the *nostos* radix's name) sorrow for returning.

Nowadays, to come to terms with the contemporary historical condition related to the father's discharge means adopting a melancholic consciousness as to a fatherly archetype which carries with it the feeling of having lost a chance. Fathers are physically less present. Symbolically, their ritual functions are no longer practised. Despite these trends, Italian cinema seems to be optimistic, in that it allows the possibility for the son to return to his father.

That is what happens in *La tenerezza* by Gianni Amelio (2017). The movie tells the story of an elderly man named Lorenzo, who succeeds in mending the relationship with his daughter, Elena, thanks to an encounter that he has with his neighbour, Michela, who makes him born again before she dies. Lorenzo looks for his daughter in the relationship that he has with Michela, as Elena looks for her father in the relationship that she has with an older man (explicitly narrated in the novel²⁴ that inspires the movie): «He's still my father», she says to her brother. He does not miss his father as much as Elena, since the father's absence is much more problematic for daughters during adulthood, when they look for a partner, than in adolescence (when the mother provides a model to the daughter). Thus, the quest for the partner may last as long as the daughter looks for her father.

In the final scene Elena returns to her father, and he to her, and they hold each other's hands as a sign of renewal and happiness. Through this gesture they recall together what they thought was lost forever and they experience the joy of forgiveness: Elena forgives her father for having looked for another daughter, while he forgives her for having stopped looking for him. The gesture is a pow-

²³ The firm mayor in *La vita comune* by Edoardo Winspeare and the incorruptible priest in *L'Equilibrio* by Vincenzo Marra (both shot in 2017) can also be considered father substitutes.

²⁴ L. MARONE, *La tentazione di essere felici*, Longanesi, Milano 2015.

erful action that is transformed into an image: their hands held together stand for the reopening of time. The power of their feeling lives in that gesture because they forgive each other by holding each other's hands; only through the creative experience of forgiveness does life reopen. This is the son's return to his father's home, where there are no strict boundaries, like in the courtroom (in the first scene we see a father and daughter in a tribunal), but only the square-like, open space in which judgement is suspended and Law embraces Desire.

Moreover, there is the gesture, one of the most famous in Italian cinema, with which a son holds his father's hand while shamefully returning to him²⁵ at the end of *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948). What occurs in this movie, too, is that little Bruno forgives his father for his weakness, for becoming a thief himself, and he does so while picking up the father's hat and giving him his hand. This is how De Sica's *Telemachia*, the phenomenological tale of a boy who grows up, ends. While Bruno trots alongside his father's wolf-like walk, the end of his childhood arrives; it is now the father who grows smaller next to his son²⁶.

Indeed, while the father is the one who always chooses his son, the son also chooses his father. Childhood is ended by a double movement: the first follows the son's idealisation of the father, who is later undervalued in order to humanise the ancient hero without dismissing him. The father acknowledges being no longer useful to the son, and welcomes him although he is not his master anymore («Thus not only his image, but above all his symptoms and the reality within his absence»)²⁷.

It is necessary to kill fathers; in other words, it is necessary for sons to conflict with their parents in order to establish their difference from them. In addition, it is necessary for the parents not to be in conflict with their sons, maintaining a vertical axle that would otherwise be lost in a symmetrically oppositional relationship with the son²⁸. Ultimately, it is necessary for sons to return

²⁵ Cfr. A. BAZIN, *Che cosa è il cinema?*, Garzanti, Milano 1999.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 310.

²⁷ RECALCATI, *Il segreto del figlio*, cit., p. 107.

²⁸ This is Claudio Bioni's character's failed attempt in *Sdraiati* (2017), a movie by Francesca Comencini based on the homonymous novel written by Michele Serra. "Sons need to find in their parents some obstacles even when they aren't. Since conflict keeps the symbolic difference between generations, thus it is an essential step to the making of life". RECALCATI, *Il segreto del figlio*, cit., p. 79.

to their parents. The sons who return are wandering, or have travelled. The son's life requires the journey; he must prefer the wandering restlessness to the belonging quiet. Finally, he must go away to return home. The end of childhood occurs when the son disappears as a child, who is tied to ordinary family life, to be born as a man thanks to the journey's experience and bewilderment, as well as the definition of his own difference. Therefore, to kill one's own father means to overcome him, to finally spare him. But after killing him, one needs to resurrect him; one must return to the father to welcome him again by forgiving him.

In the cinematographic examples that I have discussed, the structures opened by Italian cinema (the comic and romantic models) end with the children's escape from their parents becoming a necessary condition for their return. In *Cuori puri*, Agnese leaves, in *L'intrusa*, Rita flees, Sharon elopes in *Il Cratere*, and the Fontana sisters in *Indivisibili* and Fatima and Ciro in *Ammore e Malavita* begin new lives. The ones who remain on the throne are Genny (*Gomorra*) and Pio (*A Ciambra*). Italian cinema loses vitality not only because it lacks happy endings, but because it does not make a difference in terms of stories' generational renewal. It is not innovative cinema when it is seduced by Hollywood models (Pio remains in the family clan as a reward for betrayal) or when it is combined with the hypertrophic serial structure of the tragic mythos (the difference between *Ammore e Malavita* and *Gomorra*: Genny must take his father's place to continue the series for further seasons, whereas Ciro can end it, since the movie as a narrative can still definitively conclude). Gianni Amelio is the one who accomplishes the process which is the expression of Italian cinema's maturity. Amelio manages to narrate all of the childhood steps: in *La tenerezza*; Elena returns to her father. The child's return to the father is the beginning of a new life and a new cinema.