

Macchine, marziani, monsignori: Technoscience and Religion in Italian Sociopolitical Science Fiction Films¹

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Italian cinematic science fiction includes films that, while representing alien encounters, dystopias, or imaginary technological changes, mock, or warn from, contemporary trends and phenomena. Scholarly literature about Italian sociopolitical sci-fi movies is rare. This essay, surveying and analyzing selected films,² discusses how their action, dialog, and imagery conceptualize technology and science,³ as well as religion⁴ in a highly significant way, albeit less frequently.

In Ugo Gregoretti's (1930-2019) *Omicron* (1963), the titular extraterrestrial possesses metalworker Angelo Trabucco to study humans and prepare earth's invasion. The possession results in Angelo becoming hyper efficient if robotic, a trait that does not fail to catch the attention of his superiors.⁵

In Franco Castellano (1925-1999) and Giuseppe "Pipolo" Moccia's (1933-2006) *I marziani hanno 12 mani* (1964, June), four martians in human form visit Rome. Cultural differences generate comical skits, including mildly satirical ones. The four, telepathically led by a "Great Mind,"⁶ use advanced technology, yet they are not immune from bloopers: for instance, after landing they dress up like fascist militia and are roughed up by outraged Italians. They end up remaining on earth, fascinated by human women (although one of them is also attracted to jukeboxes).

In Giovanni "Tinto" Brass's (1933) *Il disco volante* (1964, December), enigmatic aliens land in the Venetian province, catalyzing petty conflicts and class divisions. Characters experiencing close encounters include a simple priest, a public servant/wannabe author, an effete count, a clumsy *carabinieri* staff sergeant,⁷ and peasant Vittoria, mother of seven. Vittoria captures, and tries to sell, one of the aliens, but she is accused of fraud. The other ones, including the *brigadiere*, who communicated with the aliens aboard the flying saucer end up at an asylum and undergo electroconvulsive therapy. The Martians leave without having made any impact.

In Elio Petri's (1929-1982) *La decima vittima* (1965), based on Robert Sheckley's (1928-2005) short story "Seventh Victim" (1953), humanity's violent instincts in the 21st century are channeled into the *Big Hunt*, a televised competition. A computer pairs random people who assume the roles of hunters and victims. Those who survive five rounds in each capacity gain fame and money. Caroline, a US-American lady, and Marcello, an Italian man,⁸ are designated as, respectively, hunter and victim. Caroline, at her tenth hunt, is followed by a filming crew planning to use the killing as an advertising stunt. The two, however, end up in love.⁹

La famiglia felice,¹⁰ the last segment of Marco Ferreri's (1928-1997) *Marcia nuziale* (1966), shows that, in the third millennium,¹¹ an *Istituto per la protezione della famiglia* (Institute for family protection) produces hyper realistic mannequins which surrogate spouses and children. The protagonist's wife Mia¹² is a "B" model produced in 1986; he grows frustrated upon coming

across a newly-wed young man whose spouse is a more realistic “Z” model, created in 1999, which the husband refuses to lend him.

In Sergio Spina’s (1928-2017) *La donna, il sesso e il superuomo*¹³ (1968), Richard Werner, a handsome pilot, is kidnapped by Karl Maria van Beethoven, owner of *Fantabulous inc.* The tycoon,¹⁴ conspiring with mad scientist professor Krohne, has a capsule surgically inserted into Werner’s brain turning him into F17, a superhero guided by a supercomputer. According to van Beethoven, humans are “anarchist, enraged sheep” and should be governed through oppression. He plans to sell F17 to governments and orders him to steal “atomic plasma” from a nuclear plant to demonstrate his might. The performance convinces the establishment, including a German official who states that throughout history “science’s destiny was always to land on the battlefield.” Van Beethoven also works on an advertising campaign for F17 with the assistance of an expert.¹⁵ Werner accidentally sees his fiancée, regaining awareness. The tycoon is defeated by an international coalition, interested in exploiting his invention, and led by Russia and the USA¹⁶ (whom he reminds of how Germans are mentally superior, pointing out that German rocket science shall help them to reach the moon). Werner, however, destroys the supercomputer, making sure that the world’s powers do not take over van Beethoven’s enterprise.

In Luciano Salce’s (1922-1989) mockumentary *Colpo di Stato* (1969, March 13), the 1972 Italian elections are supervised by a supercomputer sent by the president of the USA. The machine, named Lilly, is accompanied by its inventor, engineer Bradis. While the neo-fascist party is critical of it, calling it an “American-plutocratic monster,” the Communist party is split. Its leaders claim that they could have demanded a similar computer from Russia, but they are “realist” in acknowledging that “where there is machine, matter is talking, proletarians talk, workers talk.” A communist activist, however, protests vehemently when the machine is parked in front of St. Peter’s Square. Everyone believes that the party in power, the *Democrazia Cristiana*, will be confirmed. Unexpectedly, the Communists win by a landslide victory, as accurately reported by Lilly, that sees through walls and counts ballots ahead of humans. The US deploys troops and missiles, anticipating a civil bloodbath and war with Russia. Communist leaders, however, are unprepared, and cynically describe the victory as a trap orchestrated by the government. It is agreed to announce that Lilly malfunctioned, and governmental parties have won. Everyone claims to have saved democracy, and engineer Bradis is locked up in an asylum.

In Francesco Casaretti’s (1939) *Eat It* (1969, March 19), an industrialist exploits a mysterious primitive man characterized by an insatiable appetite for food and sex (he is called, in passing, a “Martian”). The former¹⁷ launches a campaign claiming that the canned meat he produces causes the man’s sexual prowess. The advertisements refer to sexual intercourse with the verb *funzionare*, i.e. “working” in reference to mechanical devices. The industrialist dreams of world monopoly, which he equates with “progress, emancipation, civilization, justice, peace.” However, an attempt at technologically enhancing the man’s voraciousness fails, and he even loses his sexual drive. Having personally replaced the man, the gross consumption of meat causes the industrialist to morph into a cow.

Bruno A. Gaburro’s (1939) “*Ecce Homo*” - *I sopravvissuti*¹⁸ (1969, May) focuses on the survivors of a nuclear war: Jean, a fisherman suffering from radioactivity damage, Anna, his wife, and their son Patrick, who live by the shore. Intellectual Quentin¹⁹ and veteran Len unexpectedly join them, and a competition over Anna ensues. According to Quentin, survivors have the “duty” to repopulate the earth. Jean thinks that humanity doesn’t deserve it. Ultimately, Anna and Len have sexual intercourse. Jean is hurt, but he seems more concerned with her possible pregnancy

than with infidelity. Len kills him and drives away Quentin. Anna and Len live a short romance. Quentin has remained nearby and starts building a stone hut, claiming that he is restarting civilization. Len chases him with a rifle. Quentin, however, is armed and kills him.

In Luigi Cozzi's (1947) debut, experimental film *Il tunnel sotto il mondo* (1969, July²⁰), based on Fredrik Pohl's (1919-2013) short story "The Tunnel Under the World" (1955), a man experiences time and again the fictional day July 32nd, when he gets shot just to wake up and restart the same routine. A character states that humans, unable to keep up with technological acceleration, have ended up in a "mechanized desert," and attribute more value to the machines than to the way in which they are used.

Roberto Faenza's (1943) *H2S*²¹ (1969, September 5) begins by illustrating an experiment with rats living in an overcrowded, repressed population. They develop a ruthless struggle for life, and aberrant behavior including cannibalism and refusal, on behalf of pregnant females, to bear offspring. The result is extinction. Youngster Tommaso enrolls at an institute blending a hyper technological firm and art school. Students are lectured in cage-like cubicles in a classroom where a painting displays the equation *tekne = art*. The place is replete with "formidable machines" (as Tommaso calls them), including one that slaps whoever utters "Mao," and a remote-controlled replica of a girl. Students are taught by the school's head (who dons a white, scientist-like coat) that a computer is a "docile and friendly machine that can plan our future" and that in a computer-dominated, scientific society everyone's needs should be equal. Differences among individuals, he adds, should be channeled towards eroticism, so to vent out energies that may otherwise be used against the established order. Liberty should be collective rather than personal, equated with "regression, revolution, ruin." Other teachings include: "technocracy is the science of power over liberty;" "a human being is just an aggregate of molecules, what counts is technique." A computer integrates the explanation, stating that according to Aristotle, some were born to lead, others to obey. The students rebel. The revolt, however, is hijacked by an elderly professor who manipulates Tommaso into committing a murder presented as a rehearsal, with a prop rifle, for the boss' assassination. Tommaso, shocked, withdraws in the mountains with a girlfriend. There, however, he becomes the object of the girl's sexual attention, who is bored and misses technology. He goes back to the school-firm, now led by the professor, who states that the former head talked too much about machines, not realizing that they depend on their users: once someone revolts, he adds, machines should be used, not talked about. Tommaso undergoes public punishment through bizarre contrivances,²² including a giant washing machine, and a contraption that prints letters all over his body.

In Marco Ferreri's *Il seme dell'uomo* (1969, September 27), young Dora and Cino are among the survivors of a mysterious plague and find refuge in a villa on the sea. TV news shows major cities in flames and the speaker encourages the audience to keep calm, since decisions are being made by computers "that do not have a human's doubts and hesitations" although "civilization is destroyed... and we'll need to start all over again." Cino tries to preserve culture by creating a museum, including a wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano as well as appliances, cologne, pictures from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and ancient paintings. He loves perusing volumes about technology and science in a small library housing a telescope. He often repeats advertising slogans. The couple mistake a Pepsi bottle-shaped balloon for an airship. Since Dora resists his wish to have a child, Cino resorts to intercourse with a foreign woman whom Dora eventually kills and serves to him as a meat dish. Cino, proficient in herbal medicine, creates a sleep-inducing brew to sedate Dora and get her pregnant.

Liliana Cavani's (1933) *I cannibali* (1970, April 25/30) re-elaborates Sophocles' (496-406 BCE) tragedy *Antigone*. A dictatorship prohibits burying the corpses of dissidents. Antigone, born to a bourgeois family, strives to bury her brother; she is assisted by a young man who speaks an intelligible language. Some men of the establishment scold Antigone after having arrested her. One, addressed as "professor," states that the number of rebels can be statistically calculated, adding the establishment parasitizes their creativity, and that he is willing to study rather than oppress them.

In Marcello Aliprandi's (1934-1997) *La ragazza di latta*²³ (1970, November), Osvaldo Rossi, clerk at a bank of the fictional *Smack* corporation, resists his director's insistence to conform to everyone's attire and habits. He refuses to keep sideburns and prefers skating over driving. While bragging about the advantages of his position, the director mentions sophisticated home appliances that he can afford. Osvaldo's wife is a fashion designer whose friends chitchat inane, repeating advertisement slogans. One day he is seduced by a mysterious girl. The corporation's owner offers Osvaldo a high compensation, suggesting that, by becoming rich, he will stand a better chance to impress the girl. The latter, however, is a gynoid, used to manipulate Osvaldo, who discovers the truth by visiting the firm that produced her (also belonging to *Smack*). A salesman claims that their robots are so perfect that even aliens have come to earth to purchase their patents. Osvaldo tries to destroy the girl that remains blind, then surrenders to the system. Having obtained a promotion, sporting sideburns, and driving a car, Osvaldo departs for a new professional appointment, among general applause. The girl, which he steers with a remote control, accompanies him.

In Corrado Farina's (1939-2016) *...hanno cambiato faccia* (1971, July 2), Alberto Valle, young employee of the fictional *Auto Avio Motors*, is invited by the corporation's owner, *ingegner* Giovanni Nosferatu,²⁴ to his villa in the mountains to receive the news of his promotion. At the villa, a cohort of white FIAT 500's with sinister drivers serves as Nosferatu's security; furniture and showers deliver advertisement jingles; Nosferatu practices shooting by aiming at silhouettes that groan when hit. The *ingegnere* is a vampire who owns industries, newspapers, political parties, banks, and police. He describes technology as the "philosophers' stone" of the society he is controlling, that can "turn iron into gold": "slavery into freedom, poverty into richness." The movie ends with an alleged quote from philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979): "terror, today, is called technology."

In Silvano Agosti's (1938) *N.P. Il segreto*²⁵ (1971, July 26), an engineer, president of the fictional GIAR (*Gruppo Industriale Aziende Riunite* - Industrial Group of United Firms), creates a machine, called N.P. but also dubbed "the butterfly," that turns garbage into food. Pointed out that his invention may cause massive unemployment, the engineer offers evasive answers: it will be a gradual process, he assures, and workers will be "liberated." The protagonist falls victim, however, to a scheme devised by the government and the army, conspiring with GIAR's vice president: he is kidnapped, and treated with a substance that causes amnesia. Then it is claimed that he has died in a plane crash.²⁶ The man in charge of shooting him compassionately lets the protagonist go, and the engineer, oblivious to his identity, wanders through the city, even eating from trash bins. Eventually, he is hosted by a family of workers²⁷ who have lost their employment due to the machine and who call him *profugo*, "refugee." The government subsidizes the ex-workers, but in fact eliminates them secretly and systematically through sinister machines after summoning them under the pretext of distributing their money. Additionally, women are

encouraged to undergo sterilization in order to avoid overpopulation, a practice that the government calls “vaccination against fertility.”

In 1973 Lino Del Fra (1927-1997) released *La torta in cielo* (based on a 1966 novel by Gianni Rodari, 1920-1980), a mixture of children’s film and surrealistic satire. Bombastic and dictatorial *Generale* Diomede²⁸ is in charge of organizing military action against the titular, colossal cake that one day is seen flying over Rome and is mistaken for an alien spaceship. It later is discovered to be a superbomb, a missile-turned-cake upon being filled with pastries by the pacifist son of its inventor, a military scientist. The *Generale* is assisted by a voluminous robot called Eleuterio²⁹ who introduces himself as “the son of science and modern thought.” Eleuterio is accompanied by Professor Terenzio and Professor Varrone,³⁰ who are presented as having, together, “six *lauree* [university degrees], 25 patents, 166 publications translated into 27 languages.” The two professors, quirky, bespectacled, and wearing transparent plastic suits over their formal business suits, tell the general that “science is at his orders” and that “modern war is born from [their] labs.” The robot, infinitely more powerful than an ordinary human, correctly identifies the flying object as a cake. However, his advice is ignored by the *Generale*, while the clownish professors are terrified at his honesty, and sabotage Eleuterio under the guise of repairing him. In fact, the machine is reduced to a delirious/childish-like state but keeps speaking truth to power and uttering sixty-eight slogans like “the bourgeois state can’t be changed, only broken down.” Later, the robot fraternizes with one of the children who discovered, early on, the cake’s real nature, while the *Generale*, in cahoots with manipulative industrialist Luisa Lombardoizzi (a chocolate producer), and with the help of state television, keeps spreading the narrative according to which the cake is extraterrestrial and hostile. When the cake is finally attacked on the *Generale*’s orders, with a powerful and hypertechnological weapon operated by the professors, the soldiers and authorities cry out “long live science, long live progress!” joined by Luisa Lombardoizzi, who adds “and my funding for scientific research.” However, the weapon is defused by Eleuterio and the professors are thrown into rubbish bins, while the army and the authorities are defeated and ridiculed.

Emidio Greco’s (1938-2012) directorial debut was *L’invenzione di Morel* (1974), adaptation of Adolfo Bioy Casares’s (1914-1999) novel with the same title (1940). The titular inventor creates a machine that captures and projects replicas of people. He uses it to eternize his own interactions, in a villa-museum on a secluded island, with a group of friends including his unreciprocated love, the elusive Faustine.³¹ Exposure to the machine, however, causes people to decay. The story is reconstructed retrospectively by a fugitive stranded on the island, where the machine is perpetually operated by the tide. Initially deceived by the images, he falls in love with Faustine and decides to record his own interactions with her. He finally destroys Morel’s invention when its lethal effect has already started to show.³² The story can be read as an allegory of cinema or of artistic, surrogate immortality. However, it is not without sociopolitical hints. The scientific community is skeptical towards the invention, but Morel, whose attire and manners are those of an aristocrat, is supported by industrialists, and the earliest, deadly experiments are conducted over employees without their knowledge.

In *Conviene far bene l’amore*³³ (1975) by Pasquale Festa Campanile (1927-1986), based on his novel with the same title (1975), natural fuels in the 1980s are depleted. Humans live in big cities (the story takes place in Rome) but they use carriages, carrier pigeons, and candlelight. Adults show children inoperative airports talking about the good days of old and families spend the evening in front of old TV devices singing old jingles. Exuberant, ambitious, and manipulative

(if slightly absent-minded) professor Enrico Nobili,³⁴ inspired by the theories of Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) follower, Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), discovers how to capture and store energy released during sexual acts. Although initially skeptical, the representatives of the political and military power are convinced to adopt the new technology. Families start producing domestic energy through the *orgonic box* (the adjective is borrowed from Reich) and sex becomes ubiquitous: TV shows as well as primary school lessons encourage copulation, while household tools and artworks reproduce the shape of genitals.

Alberto Lattuada's (1914-2005) *Cuore di cane* (1976) is an adaptation of Mikhail A. Bulgakov's (1891-1940) novel with the same title (1925) that satirizes the Soviet attempt at casting a new humanity. Grouchy and arrogant professor Filipp Filippovic Preobrazenski sells rejuvenation techniques to affluent, elderly patients; however, he is also a lover of culture and art, and his colleagues liken him to Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) Faust. After he transplants human organs into a dog, the latter turns into a man, Poligraf Poligrafovic Bobikov who retains much of the canine nature. Preobrazenski is an aristocrat who even burns a copy of Engels and Kautsky's correspondence upon finding it in Bobikov's possession. The latter, however, isn't fit for communism, since he is erratic and selfish. After the experiment fails, the professor resumes his research, "a genius, always seeking something impossible to find, always tormented."

In Ugo Tognazzi's³⁵ (1922-1990) *I viaggiatori della sera*³⁶ (1979), based on Umberto Simonetta's (1926-1998) novel with the same title (1976), procreation is controlled by the state and sterilization is encouraged due to overpopulation, while order is enforced under the supervision of the ESP, or *Esercito di Salute Pubblica* (Public Health Army). Elderly people wear colorful clothes, while younger ones dress in white and beige. Additionally, the former are more emotional than the latter, who are cold and superefficient (although they resort to sex as a bargaining tool, and corruption is not uncommon among them). Those who hit the age of forty-nine, like the protagonists, disc-jockey Orso and his wife Nichi, are forced to withdraw to "vacation villages." On their way, they are allowed to consume State marijuana. Once at the villages, newcomers undergo a medical visit, then they are offered what seems a perpetual holiday including sunbathing, alcoholic parties, and free sex including orgies. The guests, however, are regularly selected through a "big game," whose "winners" are awarded a cruise with no return. Technology is not pervasive, but for instance a motorway café is hyper automatised as opposed to the table service that the protagonists cherish, and village guests have to daily report to the village direction by having their palms scanned. Orso and Nichi try, in vain, to dodge the "cruise" resorting to the help of an extravagant guest who seems to have found a numerological method to beat the game.

Pier Francesco Pingitore's (1934) *Ciao marziano* (1980, February) is inspired by Ennio Flaiano's (1910-1972) short story *Un marziano a Roma* (1954).³⁷ Bix, a green-skinned extraterrestrial with superpowers and an imperfect command of Italian, lands in Rome. His arrival is welcomed enthusiastically; soon, however, the establishment starts regarding him as a threat. After his spaceship explodes, Bix, having assumed full human shape and speaking Roman, remains on earth, once again welcome.

In Alberto Sordi's (1920-2003) *Io e Caterina* (1980, December), mature and egocentric businessman Enrico Melotti (played by Sordi) is abandoned by his wife and by his lover-secretary, and replaces his maid with the titular gynoid, designed by fictional, US-American *General Electronic Robot Corporation*. After learning her chores, however, Caterina malfunctions, turning

possessive to the point of attacking Melotti out of jealousy. Switching from third-person speech to first-person one, she tells him “I am not an object... I love [you], therefore I exist.”

In Marco Masi’s (1934) *L’autouomo*³⁸ (1984) Drusilla, a prototypical and advanced “android”³⁹ is presented by one of its inventors as perfect and essentially human “except sex and soul.” The protagonist, young Abele, is convinced that the real automata are humans, and that their conditioning is even more unacceptable than that of an android. In a significant scene a manager, indifferent to the unemployed masses’ real needs, tells Abele how he mechanically selects his personnel on a “first come, first serve” basis through a computer. Abele breaks into the Cybernetics Institute where Drusilla is kept and is undergoing final “conditioning.” After running away with her, whom he considers worthy of love more than a human being, Abele is captured and stands trial where he is committed to a mental institution.

In 1992, Del Fra released the children’s film *Klon*. Four children (three boys and a girl) thwart the plans of Professor Zigote, who is working on massive human cloning. Clones are conditioned to be subservient and conformist. They consume goods according to what is dictated by TV advertisements and accept destructive capitalism to the point of embracing pollution, chemically adulterated food, and radioactive clouds. The professor is sponsored by wealthy and powerful industrialists and businessmen (whom he tries to manipulate and control), and he is assisted by private security and two robots, voluminous Erasmus and garrulous and diminutive Strawinsky. Although the villains are ultimately childish and risible, they convey a negative image of science and technology. Technology, however, is also mastered by Simone, one of the boy protagonists, who uses his skills against Professor Zigote and his minions, cracking the scientist’s informatic systems through Strawinsky, and using Erasmus, who holds the professor with its strong robotic arms. The boy even develops a friendship with the bigger robot. The story, however, ends on a somewhat pessimistic note. The professor’s villa and laboratory are destroyed, but his powerful sponsor Mr. Colomba⁴⁰ offers him the opportunity to restart elsewhere. The young protagonists have managed to steal and destroy the “cloning brain” (a component in Zigote’s main computer), but he has kept a floppy disk with the plans he needs to continue his work. Sibilla, the girl protagonist, concludes that “one never wins forever, yet we keep trying.”⁴¹

Scholarly literature on Italian sociopolitical science fiction films is not abundant. Claudio Bisoni discusses eight films (2014). He emphasizes that dystopias are represented by *intensifying* known technology and punctuated with old-fashioned elements; additionally, he focuses on the association of technology and authoritarianism, highlighting that the latter usually targets sexuality (either by forbidding or imposing it). In Bisoni’s interpretation, such movies express radical pessimism and not just a criticism of capitalism and consumerism. Eliot Chayt comments upon thirteen movies (2015). He points out that the earliest, post-neorealist science fiction films explored the challenges brought about by the Italian economic miracle, while later ones conveyed left-wing dissent. Robert Rushing comments briefly on five films, pointing out that the future they represent is similar to the present or that they suggest the incompatibility of modernity and Italian tradition (2015). Dystopian Italian films are recorded as a category in Matt Blake’s general-public book on Italian science fiction (2019) although the author includes movies whose dystopian or science fiction elements are thin. Other scholarly essays contain insightful analyses of some of the movies discussed here while grouping them with different ones (e.g., Brioni and Comberiati 2019).

Unsurprisingly, the films in question depict scientists and technicians (including communication experts) in negative fashion, as clueless and powerless at best, or accomplices of oppression at worst, in cahoots with, or subordinate to, representatives of capitalism.⁴² A notable

sub-topic is the negative representation of *psychology* in general, and of Freud's psychoanalysis in particular. In *Omicron*, a psychologist suggests studying the causes of the worker's robotic behavior so to extend it to others, enhancing production. Later he encourages the industrialists to advertise engine oil as a vegetable one. In *Il disco volante*, a provincial physician uses Freudian references to dismiss the alien encounters. In *I cannibali*, the male protagonist is apprehended and undergoes examination on behalf of a team of psychologists. In *La ragazza di latta*, Osvaldo's director uses psychoanalytic jargon, assuming that the latter's "subconscious" wants him to play an inane table game that he lists among his status symbols. Additionally, the bank's clients lie on Freudian-like couches while being served. In *...hanno cambiato faccia*, Nosferatu references Freud stating that energy wasted on sex and food should be channeled into productive activities. *I viaggiatori della sera* includes a sarcastic hint at psychoanalysis: after Nichi rejects Orso's sexual advances, he suggests inviting "professor Freud" so that he provides her with an explanation of his sex drive.

Machines are regarded with skepticism and often represented as instruments of oppression; in other words, the films in question are largely *technophobic* (Dinello 2005).⁴³ Four movies warrant special commentary about their respective representation of machines. In *Colpo di Stato*, the supercomputer is efficient and used in the interest of transparency. It is suggested, however, that the machine is ultimately useless because humans cannot handle truth. Similarly, in Del Fra's *La torta in cielo* (some) technology (i.e., the robot Eleuterio) is represented as having high potential for human development, but soldiers and scientists are unable to handle the truth it delivers. In *Io e Caterina*, the titular gynoid fails because it becomes "all too human." To be sure, this is a pessimistic movie conveying a conservative and sexist worldview. Female characters are weak, and those who voice feminist concerns are garrulous and aggressive. The protagonist does not triumph. However, the cause is the robot replicating "female" behavior including fanatic devotion. In sum, it is not suggested that patriarchy is reproachable, but only impractical, due to women's whims, which may even infect machines. In *L'autuomo*, humanlike machines are presented as ultimately better than the alienated human condition they symbolize, since humans have created their own alienation and androids are at least aware of being conditioned.

An uninvestigated element in Italian sociopolitical science fiction is religion, which for obvious reasons is almost invariably Catholicism. Religion is playfully used by the moviemakers as a repository of references that enrich their narratives, including irony and mockery. In *Omicron*, Trabucco is found catatonic; when he wakes up, a journalist (played by Gregoretti) defines the episode a "resurrection." Trabucco/Omicron enters a chapel and mistakes the purpose of a funeral, believing that a few ladies in tears are producing a nourishment of sorts. When he starts seeking knowledge through books, a seller tells him that the *Gospel of Thomas* "beats them all." Finally, communist activists use Jesus' words "I came not to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10.34) as a slogan. In *I marziani hanno dodici mani*, a publisher claims he has "launched the Bible... that somewhat boring book that even inspired a film produced by De Laurentiis,⁴⁴ but [he couldn't] figure out what to do about royalties." In *Colpo di Stato*, amidst general panic over the Communist victory, some ladies are convinced to have seen a statue of the Virgin Mary nodding in distress. State television broadcasts the performance of a hitherto unknown singer whose songs get increasingly political, including one whose lyrics are "if it's not today, it will be next year/priests and nuns will work/ and after they surrender/we'll go to the church to pray to Lenin." The ending of *I viaggiatori della sera* takes place in a boat hosting a collection of taxidermized animals: a grotesque replica of Noah's Ark. In *Ciao marziano*, Bix's portents and deeds mimic those of Jesus: he multiplies soccer balls, he creates gasoline out of nothing, he resurrects drug addict Lazzaro, he

appoints twelve followers including prostitute Maddalena as well as policeman Pietro (who later denies him), he is betrayed by a woman called Giudi, and he is persecuted by *procuratore* Ponzio. Furthermore, his “humanization” (and consequent acceptance on behalf of humans) is reminiscent of Jesus’ incarnation. Additionally, Bix uses his powers to prompt world leaders to be truthful, including Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) who tells the faithful in St. Peter’s Square to go to hell. Religious references and symbols are almost absent from Del Fra’s films. However, in *La torta in cielo*, one of the militaries who extol the superbomb, a *bersagliere*, regrets not having had one “at Porta Pia.” This is a humorous allusion to a well-known historical episode: the opening, through artillery, of a breach in the walls protecting Rome, on September 20, 1870. This was a major (and highly symbolic) episode in the unification of Italy at the expense of the Pope’s power. Other characters express appreciation for the bomb at its public presentation describing it as “a marvelous, great gift of God” and stating that “if one observes it, they can realize that there is a divine spark within the human soul.” In sum, both anti-religious and religiously-tinged characters are satirically represented as intoxicated with fetishized military technology. Similarly, in *Klon*, the industrialists and Professor Zigote gleefully toast to the latter’s invention and state, in a language reminiscent of Catholic formulae, “*sempre sia lodato/il popolo inquinato*” (“Always be praised/the people’s pollution”).

Gaburro’s “*Ecce homo*” is subtle and pessimistic in its usage of religious references. Its very title, like the 1888 book by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), ironically reconceptualizes a Biblical phrase (John 19.5); “behold the man,” writes Jean in his journal after describing the difficulties of living together. Quentin, who strives to rebuild technology and civilization,⁴⁵ is imbued of US-American triumphalist ideology that includes Biblical elements. He mimics a show, speaking through an old TV: he reads from the Gospel of John (10.22⁴⁶), and does an impression of a US presidential candidate promising to stop the Communist threat.⁴⁷ Also, Anna resorts to a reconceptualized Biblical image to utter her distress, stating, after Len’s death, that she refuses “to be the Eve of this hell on earth.” Analogously, Masi’s *L’autouomo* resorts to religious symbolism and references in a pessimistic vein. The protagonist’s Biblical name archetypically conjures up betrayal on behalf of one’s next of kin. Abele states that, in his opinion, “automata have already existed for more than a thousand years; the whole world is full of androids, as demonstrated by a cross and three nails.” In a grotesque scene, several characters recite “*Ave Maria, gratia plena*” around a lady on her deathbed. The volume and speed of their prayers quickly intensify as her agony comes to an end, and they rapaciously grab the jewels contained in a casket she is holding. Alienated, greed-driven humans are no longer able to perceive the sacredness of death and of death-related religious rituals that they monstrously distort.

Technophobic and religious imagery occasionally overlap. The supercomputer of *La donna, il sesso e il superuomo* is called SS; the acronym, besides conjuring up the notorious Nazi organization, is explained by van Beethoven as *Servus Servorum*, “servant of the servants (of God)” being one of the titles of the Pope. *Il tunnel sotto il mondo* features a talking supercomputer called D-10, tasked with steering the world. With a male voice it states that it is not perfect since it has been programmed by humans and claims to be interested in God as he’s the only one it may be controlled and threatened by. However, upon (convoluted) reflection, D-10 argues that if its mind is doing God’s will, then he himself is God.⁴⁸ Additionally, the film, which hints at humanity’s destruction described by a character that self-identifies as coming from Mars, also features a man in prophetic attire who utters a speech referencing the Book of the Apocalypse.

Catholic clergy is represented as passively caught up in modern socioeconomic dynamics, or impermeable to positive change. In *Omicron*, the titular alien observes that workers earn money that they return to their masters by consuming the very goods they produce. A priest in a black cassock and *cappello romano* purchases a car with the money collected during a mass, driven by consumeristic fever like everyone else. In *Il disco volante*, the priest is integrated in an obtuse society unable to positively respond to extraterrestrial contact. Upon encountering the Martians, *don* Giuseppe wonders whether they are real or caused by the wine he loves drinking among his parishioners, and recites the Lord's prayer. Also his superior (whom he addresses as *eminenza*) patronizingly ascribes the encounter to his drinking habits. It is also suggested that religious beliefs are powerless in the face of new persuasion techniques, or have been absorbed by them. In *Eat It*, the industrialist defines the Indians' abstention from veal as an "ephemeral superstition" that can be defeated by a good advertisement. This has a surprising parallel in *Colpo di Stato*; one of the interviewees in Salce's mockumentary is a US-American expert in occult persuaders,⁴⁹ who states that he is working on a campaign aimed at having Hindus eat beef. In *La ragazza di latta*, Osvaldo's wife intends to relaunch Byzantine attire, and rebukes him for not publicizing her activities while rebelling. After he destroys the director's desk with a sword, she complains that he could have invoked St. Theodora, or launched a "fashion crusade."

Some films suggest the failure or marginalization of Christianity. In *Il seme dell'uomo*, a TV report from St. Peter's basilica in ruins, including Michelangelo Buonarroti's (1475-1564) *Pietà* with a headless Mary, reveals a senile and agonizing Pope on a stretcher carried by men in hazmat suits, who mumbles the Act of Contrition, stating that he "has lost Paradise and deserved Hell." In *I viaggiatori della sera*, Orso's grandchild finds a Bible and asks if it is a "nice book." "Yes, very nice" replies Orso, "it has been a famous best-seller for a long time." Other hints at religion having become perfunctory are more cursory but not devoid of significance. The male protagonist of *La decima vittima* dismissively states during an interview that he "obviously" believes in God.⁵⁰ Analogously, the protagonist of *Il tunnel sotto il mondo* states, solicited by an interviewer, that he attends Christmas mass because "one never knows."

Some films hint at the clergy as taking active part in oppression and propaganda. The protagonist of *H2S* is forced to marry his institute's centenarian founder⁵¹ to make him remissive; a grotesque wedding ceremony takes place over a rotating platform, celebrated by a young priest in black cassock. *Il seme dell'uomo* represents the re-emergence of a mundane new Christianity fused with military power and concerned with the *physical* reconstruction of humanity: the protagonists are visited by people on horseback who introduce themselves as "State Administrative Service." The group includes commander De Votis,⁵² and a priest dressed in black, sporting a red cross on the chest. Both characters are androgynous (the priest is interpreted by a woman dubbed by a man). They are conducting a census, and encourage the couple to reproduce. The priest blesses a meal reciting "In the name of the Father and of the Son" (i.e., omitting the Holy Spirit). *I cannibali* features a young pope, identifiable by the white vest and the red shoes, walking down a street strewn with corpses, impassively imparting his blessing over the dead, followed by a disinfectant-spraying truck. Additionally, one of the rebels lists "atheist" among the terms that patriarchal power uses to label and persecute dissidents. In *Colpo di Stato*, the pope, after initial shock over Communist victory, suggests an overture: "the paths of democracy coincide with those of the Lord." When the US ambassador takes offence at the proposal to claim that the supercomputer has malfunctioned, a clergyman stops his impassioned speech about US-American efficiency by kicking him under the table. In *Eat It*, a priest with a white collar and black cassock is among the "great persuaders" recruited by the industrialist, including artists and intellectuals:

he holds a Bible-looking book, stating that canned meat allows one to “function” without incidents and that moderation should be practiced but while respecting “vital instincts.” The protagonist of *Il tunnel sotto il mondo* lives in an urban environment replete with advertisements, including a jingle for a birth-control pill recommended by a voice that sounds like that of a priest stating: “daughter [*figliola*], *Antifex* is an approved product.” In *...hanno cambiato faccia*, Nosferatu leads meetings with industry and opinion leaders including a clergyman whom Nosferatu calls by his first name, Ignazio,⁵³ and whom another character addresses as *eminenza*; the color of his headgear suggests he is a bishop. The clergyman cites Pope Pius XI’s (1857-1939) notorious claim according to which Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) was “the Man of Providence.” When it is decided to sell a polluting washing powder rebranded “Clean Water” using a phallic container, he approves: “it’s Biblical,” he claims citing Genesis (1.28): “be fruitful and multiply!” It is also decided to market LSD spray for the masses. One of the advertisements is a sketch featuring Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) seeking new forms of pleasure, followed by a pharmacist in a white coat (played by director Farina) praising the product. The clergyman suggests including a decorative crucifix in the scene in which the Marquis is whipping a young lady. In *N.P. Il segreto*, the protagonist is kidnapped by a gang including two men respectively dressed as a bishop (and addressed as *eccellenza*) and a priest in black cassock and *cappello romano*. It is unclear whether they are clergymen or only disguised as such. However, the film suggests that the church is involved in the conspiracy. A clergyman is present when politicians and military agree to nationalize the machine’s production and, during the engineer’s funeral, a clergyman (described in a voiceover as *eminenza*) states in the homily that his invention has “liberated the masses” adding that, in the presence of the “death’s mystery,” there is no need to investigate the causes of the accident. While the Communist party resists, through riots and strikes, the practice of subsidizing, the church preaches that “Jesus was the first socialist, the son of workers, and a worker himself, the first who fought, and died on the cross to bear witness to human equality.” The latter message, however, seems aimed at hijacking and neutralizing the communist one. Religious pilgrimages are sponsored and working-class districts are reached by church-trucks, complete with crucifix on the roof and internal altar, where the faithful (mainly children) can, after inserting a coin in a slot, have a confession via phone, and the eucharist is delivered through conveyor belts; the preacher states that the holy bread will remain within them “like an inextinguishable flame of moral and civil virtue.”⁵⁴ From a conversation, however, one infers that the ex-workers assume that the pope does not care about them.

In *Conviene far bene l’amore*, the church offers mild resistance. A clergyman⁵⁵ is shocked at Nobili’s invention: “science has always inflicted painful blows to our heart, but this is certainly the hardest one” he states. He emphasizes that the church always has preached love, but of the heart, not the body. However, complete sexual freedom including degenerate behavior is needed to produce enough energy to return to the old lifestyle and make Italy a major power. Nobili tells the clergyman that it is just a matter of “changing one commandment, or two” and that he “may become a great reformer, a new Luther.” The professor prompts the clergyman to replace, through a Council, lust with new sins, such as freedom of expression or *lèse-majesté*. “We were so successful in controlling sex...” regrets the *monsignore*. Once people start feeling saturated and subversively practice romantic love (that produces no energy), the establishment outlaws it; the Catholic Church must capitulate, and Nobili encourages the *monsignore* to re-conceptualize sentimental love as a sin.

Positive representations of religion are rare, fragmentary, and ambiguous. In *La decima vittima*, the Vatican, led by a US-American Pope, opposes the “Big Hunt,” and shooting is

forbidden in the churches. Furthermore, it isn't possible to get rapidly married, differently from the US where it can be done by inserting a coin in a device; and to divorce, one must resort to the Roman Rota.⁵⁶ The protagonists escape the game, but, fulfilling a plan devised by Caroline, they get married onboard an airplane by a priest wearing a white chasuble over a black cassock. This suggests that Catholicism may be resisting the global establishment just to ensure the existence of spaces where it can exert its own forms of control. *La donna, il sesso e il superuomo* hints at an attempt at creating a superman that failed, because the body belonged to a former priest whose moral scruples prevented him from shooting harmless women, and he committed suicide (in fact a sinful action by catholic doctrines). In *I cannibali*, young dissidents, reminiscent of early Christianity, use a fish-like symbol, and clandestinely bury their dead in catacombs of sorts. The protagonists, pursued by soldiers, enter a church. The girl drapes herself in the altar cloth; the man opens a tabernacle, thus setting free white mice and a dove. The two leave the church disguised as priests and enter a recruitment center where young males are surgically castrated; the protagonists encourage them to escape while pretending to impart a blessing. This may suggest that religious imagery can be used to convey revolutionary messages. ...*hanno cambiato faccia* features a village church attended by elderly ladies, where the protagonist tries to gather information about the vampires: Valle is prompted to leave by a young priest dressed in black, who cryptically quotes the Bible. In *Ciao Marziano*, while a cardinal in cahoots with the mafia is intent on framing Bix, outspoken priest *don* Paolo strives to keep him aware of the real dynamics of Rome's society.

In sum, Italian sociopolitical science fiction films convey a pessimistic image of contemporary Italy, or of the capitalist-consumerist world, or, more generally, of humanity. While doing so, they emphasize that technology is disappointing at best or an instrument of oppression and destruction at worst. Additionally, they feature the representation of organized religion, with an expectable focus on Catholicism, as largely unable to provide humans with spiritual or practical salvation at best, or as accomplices of authoritarian, ideological powers at worst.

¹ I express deep gratitude to Regina Begotti for tirelessly sending to Morocco relevant films and books; to Antonio Lalli (student at the Scuola d'Arte Cinematografica Florestano Vancini) for his priceless reconstruction of *Il seme dell'uomo*'s script and insightful discussions of the film; to Alice Catellani for sharing theological knowledge and discussing religious symbolism in the films; to Massimo Bezzati, for his assistance in locating extremely rare movies; to Sara Bateman for rapid and professional proofreading and editing; and, last but not least, to *Simultanea*'s editorial team.

² I use the Italian titles. Those for the English-speaking market are mentioned in the references. In case an English title deviates from the original one, or if the latter is not intuitive, or the film never circulated in the English-speaking market, I provide a literal translation in a footnote. This analysis does not extend to the literary texts on which the films in question are based. If not specified otherwise, I refer to release dates indicated in the *Internet Movie Database*.

³ Science and technology are distinct. Films, however, often evoke the former through the latter and/or through the representation of scientists. I do unpack such elements, yet I use "technoscience" in the title for the sake of brevity.

⁴ This term covers multiple items unpacked in the analysis: it references sacred scriptures and narratives, theological concepts, religious ceremonies and symbols, and clergy. *Monsignore* is a title of honor. Catholic clergymen discussed here include multiple ranks and positions (not always accurately or clearly represented). I use the term metonymically.

⁵ Gregoretto held a conference about the film in September 2006 for the series *ANAC - Percorsi di cinema* (Villa Borghese, Rome): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgMrLEDnFNc> (all web pages have been accessed on March 9, 2022).

⁶ *Grande mente*: an obvious pun, since it is homophonous with *gran demente* "Big idiot."

⁷ They are all interpreted by iconic actor Alberto Sordi (1920-2003).

⁸ He is interpreted by iconic actor Marcello Mastroianni (1924-1996).

⁹ The ending was forced by the producer and Petri loathed it (Gallotti 1967).

¹⁰ *The Happy Family*.

¹¹ The episode is preceded by a voiceover. Several speakers discuss future scenarios; one is Jack Williamson (1908-2006), referencing his novel *The Cometeers* (1950) in which he imagined the creation of artificial men and women for marriage purposes. At the start of the episode, an airplane writes in the sky “In the third millennium we’ll be happy!”

¹² Both a name and the Italian adjective and pronoun “my” (feminine singular).

¹³ Literally: *The woman, sex, and the superman*.

¹⁴ Reviews often refer to him as “professor,” and he occasionally wears a white coat. However, van Beethoven is not a scientist. Throughout the film (Italian version), he is addressed as *signore*. He epitomizes German elements and stereotypes: he cites Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), he had Lucas Cranach the Elder’s (1472-1553) painting *Crucifixion with Cardinal* stolen from a museum; the very concept of “superman” has Nietzschean undertones.

¹⁵ He is called Ogilvy, like the advertising tycoon David Ogilvy (1911-1999).

¹⁶ Initially, the US-American government, informed about F17 by a spy, disbelieves the story, after having consulted “the electronic brain of New York University.”

¹⁷ Both characters are played by Frank Wolff (1928-1971).

¹⁸ *The Survivors*.

¹⁹ He is played by Frank Wolff, who, as mentioned above, was featured in a double role in Casaretti’s *Eat it*.

²⁰ See <https://www.sciencefictionfestival.org/archivio/fiff/fiff-1969/>

²¹ The formula of sulphuric acid, notable for its stench, toxicity, and corrosiveness, intended by Faenza as a metaphor for “the putrefaction of society” (Blake 2019, 185).

²² The first one is reminiscent of the “Ludovico technique” seen in *A Clockwork Orange*. Anthony Burgess’s (1917-1993) novel was published in 1962. Stanley Kubrick’s (1928-1999) cinematic adaptation was released in 1971. *H2S* also features a woman-shaped piece of furniture similar to those in Kubrick’s movie. Pop artist Allen Jones (1937) created in 1969 furniture that inspired the one in *A Clockwork Orange* and exhibited it the year after. Finally, Tommaso’s outfit can be closely compared to those of Kubrick’s characters.

²³ *The Girl of Tin*.

²⁴ He is interpreted by acclaimed actor Adolfo Celi (1922-1986), who played van Beethoven in Spina’s film.

²⁵ *The Secret*.

²⁶ When the widow is shown pictures of the plane crash, they are those of the real yet mysterious one that killed controversial industrialist Enrico Mattei (1906-1962).

²⁷ The character of the wife and mother is interpreted by acclaimed actress Irene Papas (1926), who was the female protagonist in Gaburro’s film.

²⁸ Interpreted by iconic actor Paolo Villaggio (1932-2017), also playing a role in *Eat It*.

²⁹ From the ancient Greek word for “liberty.”

³⁰ The names of two ancient Roman authors.

³¹ Her name conjures up Goethe’s Faust, the archetypal alchemist striving to eternity.

³² Greco held a conference about the film in October 2007 for the series *ANAC - Percorsi di cinema* (Villa Borghese, Rome): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXHIFtQuZo8&t=1250s>

³³ *Making Love Well Is Worthwhile*.

³⁴ He is played by iconic actor Gigi Proietti (1940-2020).

³⁵ Tognazzi also played the protagonist of Ferreri’s *Marcia nuziale*.

³⁶ *The Twilight Travelers*.

³⁷ Flaiano wrote a comedy (1960) based on the short story, which also inspired a TV movie, *Un marziano a Roma* (1983), directed by Bruno Rasia (1926-2010) and Antonio Salines (1936).

³⁸ Portmanteau of *automa* and *uomo*.

³⁹ As she is described throughout the film, while, in fact, she is a *gynoid*.

⁴⁰ “Dove.”

⁴¹ To be sure, the catalog may be expanded beyond the one offered here. For instance, one may extend the analysis to extremely rare movies, such as Carlo Ausino’s (1938-2020) *La città dell’ultima paura* (literally: *The City of the Last Fear*, 1975). Other films present thin science-fiction elements, like Stefano “Steno” Vanzina’s (1917-1988) *Animali metropolitani* (1987), a collection of loosely connected, mildly satirical sketches beginning in a setting borrowed from the *Planet of the Apes* saga. Further candidates include films with diluted dystopian elements, such as Oscar Brazzi’s (1918-1998) *Giro, Girotondo ...Con il sesso è bello il mondo* (literally: *Ring a Ring o’ Roses, the World Is Beautiful with Sex*, 1975; the film hints at a televised, state-sponsored manhunt, and at the repression of sex, presented through

a Catholic preacher), or Lucio Fulci's (1927-1996) *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* (1984). Finally, one may consider as essentially dystopian *all* post-apocalyptic films that were abundantly produced in Italy (Renga 2011).

⁴² Insightful scholarly examinations of fictional scientists include Haynes 2017 and Weingart et al. 2003.

⁴³ *La famiglia felice*, *H2S*, *La ragazza di latta*, *L'invenzione di Morel*, *Io e Caterina*, and *L'autouomo* represent technological replicas of women that are archetypically *uncanny* according to Ernst Jentsch (1867-1919), who discussed the concept mentioning the automaton Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann's (1776-1822) short story *The Sandman* (1816).

⁴⁴ Allusion to John Huston's (1906-1987) *The Bible: In The Beginning...* (1966) produced by Dino De Laurentiis (1919-2010).

⁴⁵ Not without hesitations. After growing enthusiastic over rebuilding a dynamo, he somberly remembers that civilization, after having attained domination over nature and reached the moon, destroyed itself.

⁴⁶ The passage, that Quentin does not read entirely, may have been simply chosen as a token Biblical citation. It narrates how Jesus was challenged by Hebrew leaders to reveal himself as Messiah.

⁴⁷ He later tells the boy about a "nation" (the USA) that "decided to be free and fought for their houses and country, so that everyone would have the right to life, liberty, and happiness." While being chased by Len, he rambles Abraham Lincoln's (1809-1865) "Gettysburg Address" (1863).

⁴⁸ *D-10* is reminiscent of the word *Dio*.

⁴⁹ The character is probably inspired by Vance Packard (1914-1996), author of *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957).

⁵⁰ Another episode contains religious motifs. Marcello celebrates a sunset (*tramonto*) ceremony for the members of a cult (*i tramontisti*), who are booed by a crowd of people that he calls *neorealisti*. He reveals, however, that he only pretends to cry during the ritual, and that he does it for profit. This may be a metaphor for entertainment films, created cynically by their makers, and criticized by the advocates of *neorealismo*.

⁵¹ She is played by iconic stage actor Paolo Poli (1929-2016).

⁵² The name is reminiscent of Latin terms for "vow" and "devoted."

⁵³ The name is reminiscent of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).

⁵⁴ It is also suggested, however, that clergymen may be dissident: TV news mentions a cardinal killed in a plane crash (this may, however, even be interpreted as a settling of scores within the establishment). Additionally, the country seemingly adopts socialist formalities: the protagonist, although powerful and affluent, is addressed as "comrade," and he does the same with journalists.

⁵⁵ Reviews often refer to him as "cardinal," as also suggested by his attire. He is addressed as *eminenza* and *monsignore*. In Festa Campanile's novel he is described as "monsignor Alberoni, docente di teologia morale all'Università Cattolica" (189).

⁵⁶ In Italy, civil divorce was introduced in December 1970. The movie hints at a law that forces to turn in senior citizens to the state; Italians, however, are recalcitrant to it not only because they are in favor of patriarchal family, but because they loathe impositions.

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