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*Mapping narrative space and character
psychology in Literature and Film: the cases of
Arnold Bennett's The Old Wives' Tale and
Vittorio De Sica's Ladri di Biciclette and
Umberto D.*

Abstract

Narrative space has been discussed and conceived by theory in diverse and fascinating ways. Michel Foucault's suggestion that ours may be the epoch of space (1998) constitutes a passing reference to the importance of "space" in continental narrative theory. In a more recent overview of notions on space in cultural studies, Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz note that "despite some earlier notable efforts by A.J. Greimas and Gabriel Zoran," narrative theory has only rather recently ("as a result of the work by David Herman and Susan Stanford Friedman, and others") "began to take up more sophisticated questions about space and setting and to give them the attention they deserve" (Herman et al. 2012: 84). In particular, "narrative space" has been closely tied with character, environment, "psychology" and description. And it is exactly such "conflations" that I will be taking up in the present study. The focus of this article is to dwell on the dynamics of space and how such dynamics are likened to particular forms of narrativity and characterization, set in two very well-defined cultural frameworks: literature and film. The choice is motivated by the transcreative quality that defines these two realms of

cultural inquiry. Because of the extremely broad and intricate canvass that such a study entails, I will investigate the intertwining complex correlation of spatial dynamics and character psychology within two case studies: Arnold Bennett's The Old Wives' Tale and Italian Neorealism, in particular Vittorio De Sica's Ladri di Bicilette and Umberto D. The methodology adopted in the article will encompass both a cultural studies approach and the visual strategies of textual analysis from the perspective of film studies. This will spur a close examination of the two films under consideration, paying attention to particular cinematic sequences, set in the context of technical possibilities and offset against the matrix of creative options presented by Italian Neorealism.

Keywords: *narration; space; characterization; transcreation; textual analysis; film; literature.*

SPATIAL AND CHARACTER POLARIZATION IN THE OLD WIVES' TALE

Before moving to the close, diegetic analysis of Bennett's novel, it would be useful here to elucidate the ways in which space is treated in literature. According to Zoran, literature operates within three levels of spatial construction: 1) a "topographical level: space as a static entity," 2) a "chronotopic level: the structure imposed on space by events and movement, i.e. by spacetime," and 3) a "textual level: the structure imposed on space by the fact that it is signified within the verbal text" (1984: 335). The first two levels correspond roughly to our definitions of space, respectively seen as the product of movement between places. The third level implies having a peculiar descriptive hold on what is presented (as well as represented) in a given spatial environment. Such an arrangement of "spatialization" finds fertile ground in Andrew Gibson's claim that the approach of literary and cultural studies to narrative has "traditionally concerned itself with two distinct

kinds of space” with “profoundly ideological” connections: on the one hand, there is the space of representation. This is understood as the space of the real, the homogenous space of the world. On the other hand, there is the space of the model or describable form (Gibson 1996: 3). These diverse levels of space, however, are not fixed or closed cognitive constructs, but allow for certain things – people, ideas and so forth – to overlap with others as they “gather” within a spatial receptacle. Talking about space in narrative theory, then, certainly requires talking about character, as Phelan and Rabinowitz suggest, for it “begins to merge with character” much as “‘environment’ and psychology begin to intertwine” (Herman et al. 2012: 85). Bennett’s novel *The Old Wives Tale* is in this respect an ideal précis of literature’s intrinsic approach to “narrative specialization”.

The structure of *The Old Wives’ Tale* is based on an opposition between two different realms — Paris and the Potteries, the French metropolis and the English provinces. The sisters, Constance and Sophia, each identifies herself with one of these realms by choosing the kind of life she wants. A continuous dialectic runs through the novel as the two contrasted values and life-styles interact with each other. The most important effect of this two-fold structure is that it allows Bennett to achieve a double perspective on the Five Towns, to see it from the inside and the outside simultaneously. The Paris section of the novel provides an external perspective on Bursley, which is presented directly not only through the eyes of Constance, who is fully integrated within her home provincial community, but also through the eyes of Sophie, the rebel and outsider, returning from Paris. It is this duality of vision that is missing from most of Bennett’s novels set in the Five Towns. In

Anna of the Five Towns (1902) and *Clayhanger* (1910)¹, there is no external perspective: the Five Towns are only perceived from within, devoid of any metropolitan perspective. The works suffer as a result from what Henry James labelled “saturation”, “the dense unconfused array of facts making the life of the Five Towns press upon us” (1956: 267), eschewing any alternative point of view.

Bennett had previously adopted this technique of double perspective in *The Death of Simon Fuge*, a short story in *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*. In the story, a highly cultivated Londoner is introduced into the provincial world of the Five Towns and his ambivalent reactions to this experience are charted. Passing from hostility to a reluctant admiration for Five Towns life, he recognizes that the people whom he had expected to be boorish are in fact contented and civilized. The strictures of this provincial “civilization” are shown by the fact that Simon Fuge, a native and an artist of genius, felt the need to exile himself for the sake of his art, and because of the apathy that he and his art were shown by the locals. The narrator is obliged to accept that existence in the Five Towns is a compromise. The people are concerned only with work and with making money. Yet, although totally materialistic, at the same time, they evince a genuine passion for culture. Their most deep rooted sense of belonging, however, is undoubtedly with Bursley, as shown by their suspicion towards Fuge who had dismissed them when he rejected Bursley in favour of the more challenging realms of London and Paris.

In the story, there is a fine balance between approval and disapproval of the Five Towns, holding them “in perfect equivocal poise”. This poise results from the dual perspective,

¹Many critics have focused on the role played by time in the novel, see Forster (1947).

which allows Bennett to “achieve the perfect balance between internal and external vision” (Wain 1967: 43).

In *The Old Wives' Tale* Bennett elaborates upon this double perspective through Sophia, who functions as the filter for the external perspective. Even as a young girl in the first book she is very much an outsider in her own community, rebelling against her family and the town of Bursley. She refuses to work in the family shop as this would force her to spend the rest of her life in Bursley. Moreover, in her eyes, her paralysed father comes to represent all the stagnancy of this provincial backwater. When he opposes her career choice, that of a teacher, her frustration and resentment come finally to the surface:

She had youth, physical perfection; she brimmed with energy, with the sense of vital power; all existence lay before her... Here was this antique wreck, helpless, useless, powerless — merely pathetic... He knew nothing; he perceived nothing; he was a ferocious egoist, like most bed-ridden invalids, out of touch with life...²

Gerald Scales provides her with the means to escape.

He belongs to the larger world which lies outside the boundaries of the Five Towns and embodies all its romance for Sophia:

He had come to her out of another world... She, living her humdrum life at the shop! And he, elegant, brilliant, coming from the cities! (p. 148).

Constance, the filter for the internal perspective throughout the novel, stands at the opposite pole to Sophia from the beginning. She is shown to be perfectly at home with the rigidly dull provincial life of the town, whose most exciting social event is

²A. Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, (1991: 84).

the death of an elephant. The family shop is her sole passion, a sentiment shared by Samuel Povey, with whom she naturally forms a relationship, albeit devoid of passion. Bennett does not attempt, directly or indirectly, to arbitrate between these two contrasting reactions to Bursley. Constance's devotion to the place is presented as something just as acceptable as Sophia's rejection of it. Both their points of view are limited and purely subjective, but neither can be argued definitively as either right or wrong.

In the second book, Bursley is seen from a single perspective — from the point of view of Constance and other like-minded characters who are equally at home in the community. Sophia has eloped so an alternative focus is absent and there is nothing to counterbalance an unquestioning acceptance of Five Towns life. One can perceive a gentle irony in the authorial comment and the way that life in Bursley is presented. However, this does not detract from Constance's sense of fulfilment in her marriage and new family and her feeling to belong to St. Luke's Square, even after she has lost her shop. Life for her may seem empty, but it is not meant to be seen as in any way as humdrum. When, at the death of her husband, Constance reflects on her twenty-one years of happily married life, there are no grounds to suspect irony or lack of sympathy on the part of the narrator. Even though her happiness derives from a restricted vision of life, it is no less authentic for that.

The third book, set in Paris, provides an external perspective on Bursley³. Indirectly, it comments on Bursley by means of implicit contrast between the two worlds. Paris, with its fashionable people, its fancy restaurants, its famous buildings, and the general rhythm and excitement of life there (at least at

³According to W. Allen (1948: 61) «a dissonance between the Paris chapters and the rest of the novel» gives the novel a flawed structure.

the beginning), gives it an importance and sense of being at the centre of things, which provincial Bursley clearly does not have.

Thus, once Sophia returns to Bursley at the beginning of the fourth book, we have a new “foreign perspective”. (Lucas 1974: 113). We see Bursley from the outside and can identify with her even more critical attitudes towards it after such a long absence. She is struck by the smoke and the dirt, the unfashionable and run down provincial air that St. Luke’s Square exudes, the apathy shown by the inhabitants towards the world outside:

These people in Bursley ... probably never realized that the whole of the rest of the world was not more or less like Bursley. They had no curiosity. Even Constance was a thousand times more interested in relating trifles of Bursley gossip than in listening to details of life in Paris... her curiosity did not extend beyond Bursley. She, like the rest, had the formidable, thrice-callous egotism of the provinces (p. 514).

Sophia feels just as “confined” by this blinkered provincial world as she did in her youth.

However, her outsider’s contempt towards Bursley is counter-balanced, by Constance’s approval as a convinced insider. When Sophia suggests that they abandon Bursley, Constance’s defence is both passionate and unhesitant:

“There’s some of us like Bursley, black as it is!” said Constance. And Sophia was surprised to detect tears in her sister’s voice (p. 555).

We are forced to readjust our attitude to Bursley and to see it under another light, such as with a double perspective. Sophia, too, must reconsider her initial condemnation of Bursley. She finally recognizes that it has qualities she has hitherto ignored.

Furthermore, when the two sisters go to stay in a hotel in Buxton, Sophia admits the superiority of this provincial hotel over the Pension Frensham she ran in Paris:

Sophia was humbled. She had enough sense to adjust her perspective (p. 548).

She even unconsciously accepts the provincial environment, though rationally she refuses to be a part of it:

Sophia had said to herself at the beginning of her sojourn in Bursley, and long afterwards, that she should never get accustomed to the exasperating provinciality of the town (which) had oftener caused her to yearn in a brief madness for the desert-like freedom of great cities. But she had got accustomed to it. Indeed, she had almost ceased to notice it" (p. 564).

Bennett's adjustment of the perspective shapes our own understanding and appreciation of Bursley. In the first book, the two opposed points of view shift all the time, in each of the next two books, the author favours a single point of view in the separate presentation of each world, while the last book restores the double perspective of the first one.

The metropolitan and provincial visions are intrinsically shaped by a dual perspective. Bennett gives Sophia a two-fold role in the novel: she is both the cosmopolitan outsider in Bursley and the provincial outsider in Paris. She has a total disregard for the native provincial culture which produced her, but she is unable to construct another identity for herself within the new metropolitan world. Her tragic destiny in the novel is to be engulfed in a no-man's land between cultures. Her life in Paris is characterized by an increasing frustration as the sexual and social liberties her new environment gives her, instead of

helping her to reach her full potential, only alienate her. She is unable to identify with such a bewildering new world, and thus she has to come to terms with the previously despised values of her provincial past in order to embrace a sense of identity, albeit limited by the milieu that surrounds her. One should not just ascribe this pattern to the paradigms of the realistic convention where “environment determines character and fate”, as J. Hepburn does (1983: 22). Its implications are more complex and diverse in nature, as W. Bellamy argues:

For the cultural emigrant, no cultural milieu can be authentic; like Wells' Mr. Polly, Sophia carries her own culture with her into a world of cultural fragmentation ... The essence of Sophia's reaction to Paris is one of cultural nostalgia; her regurgitation of Five Towns standards only reinforces the sense that she is cut off from any communal participation in an authentic cultural mode. In a world of impermanence and inauthenticity, she is reduced, obsessively and regressively, to the criteria of the culture which produced her. She is the prototype, therefore, of modern man, who, knowing that his emigration is irrevocable, is yet bemused by residues from a culturally formative past⁴.

A kind of intrinsically dialectic relationship arises between Sophia and the city of Paris, through which a double perspective stems. We come to appreciate the metropolis mainly through Sophia's consciousness, but Bennett reveals the limits of her point of view by hinting at her wasted opportunities, the number of potentially great opportunities which her environment does offer but which she fails to capitalize upon. The period Sophia spends in Paris is characterized by a profound artistic revolution. However, when she returns to Bursley and Dr. Stirling wants to

⁴W. Bellamy (1971: 164).

know about Zola's *Le Debacle*, she can only remember a poster. In this respect Bennett says:

Sophia's life, in its way, had been as narrow as Constance's. Though her experience of human nature was wide, she had been in a groove as deep as Constance's. (p. 549).

She totally and vastly ignores the implications of the social and historical upheaval; the Siege only affects her mind because it results in "the closing of the creamery" and an increase in the price of eggs.

From the sexual and erotic standpoints, however, her deprivation and even self-mutilation are strongly visible. Once granted the sexual freedom denied by Bursley, paradoxically she suppresses once more that side of her nature. This can only be explained in part by the disillusionment behind her marriage to Gerald. At the Little Louis restaurant, Sophia is described as being aflame with desire for Chirac, yet she refuses to yield to her base desires, and an "obstinate instinct" holds her back. What the exact nature of this constitutes can only be guessed. Perhaps a clue is to be found in Sophia's reaction to the execution of Rivain. She watches the guillotining with morbid fascination.

From a Freudian point of view, red becomes the *leitmotif* for this scene — signifying passion, blood and the erect male organ — and the explicit phallicism of the guillotine — its red columns rising upright, and Rivain's head like Sophia's virginity lying "prone under the red column" awaiting the *coup de grâce* — serve to expose her repressed sexual fears, and desires⁵.

All her repressed emotional and sexual desires and energies become channelled into an obsession with money. Her lower middle class background becomes an increasingly dominant

⁵For a fuller analysis of this passage, see Lodge (1983: 31-32).

element of her personality⁶. All of her relationships with other people are based not on love but on financial profit. She looks down on Madame Foucault for her lack of business acumen, even though she owed her life to the latter when she had been critically ill. When her steadfast old charwoman “by whose side she had regularly passed many hours in the kitchen, so that she knew every crease in her face and fold of her dress” dies, she soon forgets her and she is “vanished out of Sophia’s memory”. Sophia is just as isolated from an interpersonal point of view as Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. Like Crusoe, she displays all the traits of capitalistic individualism. Since her “sole interest was in her profits”, she is naturally a successful businessperson. At the end of her stay in Paris, she becomes a tragic, lonely figure, her only companion an old servant with whom she has no emotional ties. She has become estranged from her husband and, unlike Constance, is childless.

Seen in this light, Sophia’s life in Paris is punctuated by frustration and deprivation. It is reminiscent of that of another young migrant in Bennett’s first novel, *A Man from the North* (1898). The ambitious young writer Richard Larch comes up to London to make his name, but soon discovers that he does not have the mettle to make his mark and eventually marries a cockney waitress. The novel is a study of disillusionment, the frustration of the provincial thrust into a cosmopolitan culture where the only identity he is able to scrape out for himself is rooted in the very same provincial past that he had craved to escape from.⁷

⁶«But after the death of her romantic illusions, all the ‘Teutonic astuteness’ in her reveals itself, all her latent capacity for organization not unmixed with the terrible ‘thrift’ ingrained in every Five Town heart...» Lafourcade (1971: 107).

⁷According to Kendall (1987: 75), the parallels between this novel and *The Old Wives’ Tale* are inexplicably ignored by critics who tend to identify *Sacred and*

On the one hand, the limitations of Sophia's provincial outlook on life are put into relief by her reactions to the metropolis. On the other hand, the provincial standards she falls back on expose the hollowness and shallowness of the metropolitan culture. When, for the first time after her illness, Sophia is able to wander around Madame Foucault's apartment, her first reaction of admiration quickly gives way to an overly critical attitude:

The first impression on Sophia's eye was one of sombre splendour. Everything had the air of being richly ornamented, draped, looped, carved, twisted, brocaded with gorgeousness... But Sophia with the sharp gaze of a woman brought up in the tradition of a modesty so proud that it scorns ostentation, quickly tested and condemned the details of this chamber that imitated every luxury. Nothing in it, she found, was "good". And in St. Luke's Square "goodness" meant honest workmanship, permanence, the absence of pretence. All the stuffs were cheap and showy and shabby; all the furniture was cracked, warped, or broken" (p. 385).

The superficiality, ostentation and underlying hypocrisy of Parisian culture contrast with the honest down-to-earthiness of provincial culture. To Sophia's penetrating eyes, the slick surface of Parisian life is scraped away to reveal a grimy and corrupt undercoat. The sublime courtesan who has Sophia in awe at the Restaurant Sylvain on her arrival in Paris is reduced, without clothes or make-up, to the grotesque "obese sepulchre" of the strewn figure of a corseted Madame Foucault lying on the floor.

In the metropolis, people are promiscuous and mercenary in their relationships. Traditional marriage and family play no part

Profane Love and Leonora as the earlier of Bennett's works which prefigure the thematic concerns of *The Old Wives' Tale*.

in this amorphous world where the search for new sensations and experiences dominates human intercourse. For the fickle Gerald, a creature of the metropolitan ecosystem, Sophia is no more than a casual fling. She, however with her provincial outlook, seeks the security and solidity of a permanent union enshrined in marriage. Sophia triumphs:

... this fragile slip of the Baines' stock, unconsciously drawing upon the accumulated strength of generations of honest living, had put a defeat upon him (pp. 322-323).

The marriage is of course doomed to failure from the start: something which reflects more upon the hollowness of relationships in the fluidity of Parisian society than upon provincial castration of Eros.

Even Sophia's mundane existence focussed on work and on money acquires sense when compared to Parisian frivolity. Chirac and his milieu are part of a hedonistic Bohemian society, which for Sophia acquires a distinct "quality of casualness". Without warning, Chirac and Gerald go to Auxerre to see a public execution. Without telling Sophia, Madame Foucault moves to Brussels with her lover. Generally, the Parisians are rootless, flitting between experiences and activities. Money is not important in itself but has value only so far as it serves as a means for them to gratify their increasingly immoral desires. Gerald loses no time in squandering his inheritance forcing him to borrow money from Chirac, his best friend, which he had no intention of repaying. Madame Foucault tries to trick Sophia into paying for the furniture. Sophia is herself a tough businessperson but is always honest in her financial dealings. She even settles Gerald's debt. In her dealings with others, she focuses only on the financial aspect of the relationship. Indeed,

she distances herself emotionally from others and remains at heart a detached figure.

Bennett creates a double perspective on the metropolitan society of Paris, as he does in the episodes set in Bursley. The technique, however, differs slightly as there is no distinct “inside” voice or point of view analogous to that of Constance; rather, he uses Sophia as the spokesperson for the provincial vision, which is ironic perhaps. However, he cleverly prevents us from identifying with her completely by revealing in all their starkness the limitations of her worldview. As in the Bursley, part of the novel, Bennett once more, does not take sides...

Most critics, including for example Wain (1967), argue that the Paris section of the novel underlines that Sophia is, and will always be, first and foremost a Baines, imprisoned by her provincial upbringing. He concludes that:

... the book's main point ... is that Constance and Sophia, both formed in St. Luke's Square, live the life of St. Luke's Square wherever they go, and that in consequence the two lives, outwardly contrasting, are inwardly identical. (p. 40)

Such a deterministic approach hardly does justice to the novel's exposé of the frisson between metropolitan and provincial cultures. The metropolis is characterised as amoral and amorphous, obliging the individual to construct their own identity within the maelstrom of “cultural fragmentation”. By contrast, the province demands a secure identity with a preordained place within a rigid social and moral hierarchy whilst, in essence, Sophia is different not only from Constance but also from Becky Sharp. She rebels against the puritanical mores of the Five Towns yet she lacks the inner resources to achieve fulfilment in Paris. Ultimately, her return to type in adopting Baines standards is a last ditch defence: a way to cope

with a frustratingly incomprehensible and inhospitable environment.

A textual analysis approach to Bennett's manipulation of space.

When Bennett's manipulation of space is analysed more deeply, the pattern of Sophia's life is clarified. Space contracts and expands from the provincial town of Bursley to the conurbation of Paris in tandem with the cultural and psychological evolution of the two sisters, above all Sophia. Early on in the novel, there is already a stark contrast between the small town where the sisters live and the wider world out there beyond their horizon. Using a technique analogous to a zoom lens in photography, Bennett pinpoints the position of their home, St. Luke's Square, first in relation to the world as a whole — they are “established on the fifty-third parallel of latitude” — and then in a series of diminishing concentric circles, to England, the country, to Staffordshire the county, to the Potteries, the district and finally to Bursley, the town itself:

Add to this that the Square was the centre of Bursley's retail trade ... and you will comprehend the importance and the self-isolation of the Square in the scheme of the created universe. There you have it, embedded in the district, and the district embedded in the country, and the country lost and dreaming in the heart of England! (p. 40).

In this passage, the expressions “self-isolation” and “lost” stand out. They underline the limited perspectives of both Constance and Sophia who “paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation of which, indeed, they had never been conscious”.

However, their world shrinks even more, eventually to the Baines house and shop. The limits of their existence and mental horizons are marked out by the walls of the house, described as “the microcosm”. Bennett conveys these limits through his employment of the window as a metaphor for obstructed vision. When we first meet the sisters, they are looking out of the window of the family shop, spying on Maggie as she crosses the Square to meet her “lover”. Constance and Sophia are isolated from even the small world of the Square as reflected by the fact that when Maggie and her fiancé disappear from the view of the sisters’ vantage point, they also leave the sister’s world:

The couple disappeared together down Oldcastle Street (p. 43).

Gradually, in the first novel, Sophia’s territory is expanded. She struggles to escape from the “labyrinth” of the Five Towns. Her first port of call is Miss Chetwynd, then the library, afterwards accompanied by Gerald she ventures further afield to see the new unfinished railway. Eventually, Aunt Harriet takes her beyond the boundaries of the Five Towns to Axe, and finally almost inevitably she elopes first to London and then to Paris. All these journeys reflect her profound frustration with Bursley and the limited range of possibilities that it can offer her. By contrast, Constance and her mother content themselves with visits to the market in the Square, only once daring to go beyond the playground to see the elephant. In each case, the expanse of the physical world mirrors the dimensions and the nature – the “landscape” – of the sister’s inner character.

In the third book, there is an inverse relationship between the different internal and external expansions of space for both Sophia and Constance. The more external physical space increases for Sophia, the more her inner space decreases, as

symbolised by the window... On the surface, Sophia has freed herself from not only spatial but also moral restrictions let loose in “the desert-like freedom” of Paris, but in fact, her life, as she comes gradually to realize, is merely a bland succession of “hundreds of rooms — some splendid and some vile, but all arid in their unwelcoming aspect”. Again and again, Sophia is found looking out of a window, which illustrates her alienation and isolation, her restricted vision in every sense, and how far removed she has become from experience. Ironically, her view from the windows in Paris is in essence just as limited as the view from her window in Bursley. While convalescing in Madame Foucault’s apartment, all she can see from her window is a small courtyard and part of the next house:

She pressed her face against the glass, and remembered the St. Luke’s Square of her childhood; and just as there from the show-room window she could not even by pressing her face against the glass see the pavement, so here she could not see the roof; the courtyard was like the bottom of a well. (p. 383).

The parallel between her views of the Square and of Paris resurfaces when, on her return to Bursley, Sophia looks out of the window in St. Luke’s Square, and comments that “it seemed to her scarcely bigger than a courtyard”. Ironically, she has fled the suffocating environment of Bursley only to become entrapped in a similar life in Paris. In either place, she is both physically and spiritually imprisoned, excluded from the life that unfolds outside her window. Sophia looks out of a window for the last time in Manchester just before her death, with the lifeless body of Gerald lying just a few feet away in the room:

She turned to the veiled window and idly pulled the blind and looked out. Huge red and yellow cars were swimming in thunder along Deansgate; lorries jolted and rattled; the people of Manchester hurried along the pavements, apparently unconscious that all their doings were vain... She dropped the blind. (p. 578).

Sophia has lost all interest in the world outside her window as she has come to realize the absurdity of life; an outcast from the world, suffering from existential loneliness, she instead turns her gaze to the inside of the room and upon her husband's corpse. This focus on a restricted physical space testifies to her complete alienation, the imprisonment of her soul. Her long spatial journey from Bursley to Paris and then back again is thus reduced to a mere exchange of rooms with windows that offer only limited views.

Italian Neorealism and the visual dynamics of space in Ladri di Biciclette and Umberto D.

If Bennett's manipulation of space in the *Old Wives' Tale* can be seen as an ideal visual essay that forages through the large thicket of characterizations running through the novel, Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* and *Umberto D.* further enhance the dual relationship of space and characters' psychology, albeit of course in an other medium. As in Bennett's novel, the construction of the urban world in *Ladri di Biciclette* and *Umberto D.* is not limited to topography but acquires a metacinematic identity, providing a significant historical, social and psychological resonance. Both films in fact clearly exemplify the ways in which various forms of film practice are imbricated in negotiating the city's spatial dynamics and how these depictions can be understood in relation to the

psychological landscape that defines each narrative. Before moving to the core analysis of the two films under consideration, I shall briefly contextualize them within Italian Neorealist Cinema.

Italian Neorealism was a brief but hugely influential film movement, lasting from the end of WWII until 1951. Neorealism originated from the writings, in the magazine *Cinema*, of a particular circle of film critics who, prevented from writing about politics, rebelled against the prevailing Italian film industry under Mussolini. The main focus of the critics were the *telefono bianco* films of the period, as well as the influx of Hollywood imports. In contrast to these bourgeois escapist melodramas, critics urged Italian cinema to turn to the verismo literature of the turn of the century and the poetic realism of French cinema of the 1930s, exemplified by the works of Jean Renoir. The result was a selection of Italian films that gained worldwide recognition: Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *Alemannia Anno Zero* (1947); Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1947); De Sica's *Sciuscià* (1946), *Ladri di Biciclette* (1948), and *Umberto D.* (1951).

The major feature of Neorealist filmmaking is a concentration on the lives of ordinary people struggling against adversity in the devastation of the aftermath of WWII. The films tend to focus on poor, working class people and their everyday lives, the socio-economic conditions of the time, and the desperation and moral ambiguity which results. However, not only was the subject matter different than what had come before – Neorealism also created a distinctive approach to film style. Neorealist mise-en-scène relied on actual location shooting (mainly outdoors), and its photographic work tended towards the rawness of documentaries. Shooting on the streets and in private

buildings made Italian camera operators incredibly adept at cinematography. In addition, the lack of sound equipment (dialogue was dubbed through post-synchronization) allowed for smaller crews and much greater freedom of movement. This particular *mise-en-scène* and more adept camerawork (the use of long shots, deep focus, long takes) allows for a multiplicity in the details.

Such aesthetic endeavour becomes of primary concern in its application to urban space. For Deleuze, one of the main features of Italian neo-realism is the creation of mixed up spatial referents. This breaking of spatial coordinates constitutes the formation of the *any-space-whatever*, the site in which the characters of the new cinematic image enact what becomes a specifically urban voyage. In Deleuze's formulation, two main factors contribute to the proliferation of these spaces in film after World War II:

The first, independent of the cinema, was the post-war situation with its towns demolished or being reconstructed, its waste grounds, its shanty towns, and even in places where the war had not penetrated, its undifferentiated urban tissue, its vast unused places, docks, warehouses, heaps of girders and scrap iron. Another, more specific to the cinema ... arose from a crisis of the action- image: the characters were found less and less in sensory-motor "motivating" situations, but rather in a state of strolling, of sauntering or of rambling which defined pure optical and sound situations"⁸.

This operational conception of the urban space brought about by Italian neorealism is clearly evident in De Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* and *Umberto D.* Both films are set in Rome and this gives a more profound authentic scope, being it both the capital

⁸Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 120.

and the monopoly of the historical and social upheaval post-liberation. But if one expects to find a seductive and monumental Rome, one would be profoundly wrong: in the films' world Rome is totally alienated, a geometrical space of solitude and hostility, a place which annihilates the most authentic social values. In this respect, it serves as a backdrop to the characters' suffering and thus provides an implicit commentary to the sense of displacement. It is through the representation of the city that De Sica articulates his striking and effective social discourse. *Ladri di Biciclette* shares a lot of similarities with *Umberto D.*, particularly in relation to the narrative structure. Bazin's description of *Ladri di Biciclette* as a "walk through Rome by his father and son" is not limited to geography" (1971: 55).

As Giordana Bruno points out, Bazin's characterization of *Ladri di Biciclette* as a "city walk" locates the film firmly in the tradition of neorealism, which in her own words is "a movement that developed street life filmically, exposing the living component of the production of space" (2002: 30). Such a, in de Certeau's terms, "walking rhetoric", however, follows a precise rationale, as it manages to both shape the narrative construction of the film and establish De Sica's operational conception of the city. The film is in fact primarily a walk through Rome and its social institutions, whose indifference to the father's (Antonio Ricci) and son's (Bruno) tribulations constitutes the palimpsest of De Sica's critical agenda. Neither the law nor even the Church manage to alleviate the problems which affect Antonio; in this way the simple theft of the bicycle becomes a self-defeating journey through the moral and ethical contradictions of Italian life of the period. Rome's representation thus becomes a metaphor for a much broader historical and social malaise.

In order for the film's social criticism to work, Antonio's plight must not be seen as unique. Accordingly, De Sica offers a series of visual essays which shape the commonality of Ricci's condition. Any attempt to see Antonio's suffering as an individual condition is dismissed by the number of shots which by panning or craning the city's landscape, universalize his story. A great visual essay is, in this respect, the market sequence in which the multitudes of used bicycles shape the plurality of Antonio's plight. The first shot is an establishing one: Antonio with his son and friends are immersed within the market stalls. Both foreground and background elements are highly significant, showing small parts of bicycles being sold and dismantled. The initial tone is rather optimistic, setting certain expectations both from the audience and from the characters on screen, suggesting some hints of hope (Antonio's line is poignant in this respect: "I'll do anything to find it"). But as the sequence unfolds, the mood drastically changes. In order to create a gripping atmosphere De Sica employs a number of cinematic techniques which enhance the sense of tension. First of all, the use of extensive tracking shots which accompany Antonio's and Bruno's movements through the stalls, heightening the rhythmic patterns and thus increasing the pace of expectations. Moreover, the compositional strategies are rather poignant: Antonio and Bruno are always in the background planes (like all the other people) while the foreground is occupied by thousands of bicycles. In this way De Sica is stressing a dual sense of detachment: one between the characters on screen and the bicycles, the other between the audience and the bicycles themselves. What the sequence is doing here is violently drawing us within the diegetic strictures of the film, making us live the drama of the protagonists. Long

distance shots are employed to set a dichotomy between Antonio and all the other workers who fill the frame. Furthermore, the performances are particularly striking in this respect: every person walks with their head down, suggesting a sense of total externalization from the surrounding space. Editing, however, plays the most important role: De Sica constantly cuts from Antonio's and Bruno's faces to the images of new bicycles, stressing the characters' potentiality and clear impossibility of reaching their goal. As the task becomes more and more difficult De Sica introduces a background score which perfectly comments the images which fill the screen. The melodic tunes of the musical accompaniment clash with the harshness of reality, while the camera pulls away from the bicycles, hinting at a sense of permanent loss and defeat. The last dissolve works as a sharp coronation of the rising pessimism of the sequence: the initial hopes and desires have now definitely expired.

Using de Certeau's spatial reconceptualization of such stylistic figures as synecdoche (in which a part stands in for the whole) and asyndeton (in which linking words are eliminated), one can easily affirm that the "market stalls sequence" is overall constructed by taking a set of fragments — pieces of the everyday that stand in for larger social and political concerns — and then stringing them together. Hence the function of the sequence is to reinsert within its diegesis the polarizing interplay between the social, political and the personal, creating a narrative that in de Certeau's words: "replaces totalities by fragments (synecdoche — a *less* in place of a *more*) and disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive" (asyndeton *nothing* in place of *something*) (2002: 117). In this way, the sequence and, to a larger extent the film as a whole structures a precise critique of the city (caught up in a

moment of historical transition), reasserting the predicament of the individual in the face of the spatial and social fragmentation of the city.

If the first part of the film presents an image of the city as a projection and prolongation of Antonio's suffering, the second part deals instead with another Rome which is set against the large masses of Antonio's fellow sufferers. This is the middle class city of churchgoers and soccer fans, only preoccupied of their leisure activities. What the film is suggesting here is that the recent historical events (namely the twowars) have affected only the lower classes and that the bourgeoisie, paraphrasing Millicent Marcus, enjoys a sort of a-historical status, a distinctive exclusivity from the social crisis (1986: 57). But the hostility and alienation comes from the same community which is suffering Antonio's plights. The sequence in via Panico where Antonio finds the thief and tries to make allies within the crowd perfectly reinforces the individual / collectivity antinomy. Likewise, the closing of doors and shutters can be read in these terms. Thus openings are closed on him at moments associated with friends and neighbours. None of these offer any hope for integration or for a solution to Antonio's problem. What the film does is thus displace a basically social struggle onto the level of an inner malaise. In order to achieve this goal De Sica constructs a carefully planned *mise-en-scène* which, by using the neorealist techniques of transparency and non-professional actors provides a much more gripping cinematic experience.

The major stylistic goal in fact of *Ladri di Biciclette* is the construction of spatial dialectics, primarily the contrast between background and foreground. This cinematic tension structures a more profound antithesis, that between the individual and his society or more generally the conflicts and antagonisms which

affect the class struggle. A frequent deployed spatial strategy is the pan or dolly shot which constricts and flattens space only to open up or stretch the horizon line into deep background space and thus offering possibilities on the spatial level for the characters which are ultimately frustrated on the narrative plane. Moreover, the construction of background buildings answers to the same purpose: lock the characters in a web of urban strictures which limit any form of dynamism. Thus what these three sections of Rome offer is an exposé of a community shaped by social injustice, poverty and crime; each image of the city is embedded within a crushing and intolerable pessimism. In this respect Rome becomes both a reflection of the director's historical disappointment and a negation of every form of optimism, in a hierarchy of disillusion. Unlike Rossellini's "visionary city" in *Roma Città Aperta* founded on a compromise of Marxist and Catholic ideals, De Sica's Rome presents no sense of cohesion. Furthermore, if Rossellini's city was constructed as a well-known physical setting (the famous monuments - St Peter's, the Spanish sets) De Sica's city is, as I previously stated, fragmented, de-centred and full of unfamiliar spaces. Rome is presented as a labyrinth of endlessly twisting and turning streets which echo Antonio's endless search. The inhabitants of this city are the logical extensions of an oppressive and fragmented space. The irascible crowds are in particular the psychological symptoms of this sense of closure. Instead of helping each other these mobs of people are in mutual competition, replacing Rossellini's urban solidarity with an implacable egocentricity and selfishness.

Umberto D.

De Sica's second neorealist landmark, *Umberto D.* constructs a similar representation of the city (Rome) but takes it a step further, the film being, as Bazin says, the document of a "moral and pessimistic resentment, closed to every form of historical or existential comfort" (1971: 65). The narrative structure of the film is focalized on the old Umberto and his solitude (his only friend is his little dog), emphasizing the sense of separation between the protagonist and the outside world. Much as in *Ladri di Biciclette*, the suffering and misery that Umberto experiences are spread across an urban milieu marked by spatial instability, fragmentation and heterogeneity.

Such an approach to narrative and characterization dovetails with Louis Wirth's concept of the dichotomy between individual and group. In *Urbanism as Way of Life* Wirth explains that the life of the urbanite is in many ways characterized by the social isolation of the individual despite physical proximity to others. (1938: 15)

In order to achieve this intent, De Sica and scriptwriter Zavattini reduce the plot's backbone to the very minimum, focusing on the life of the character within its quotidian context. Each visual essay becomes then an extension of Umberto's psychological chasms, functioning as a distinctive signifier of the character's inferiority. The cinematic representation of the city answers to this precise precept, setting the events within a desolated and miserable context. Since the very beginning of the film, De Sica's camera is immersed within the urban net, explored in all its directions, horizontal and vertical, in its open yet reclusive and segregated structure, restrictive of human freedom. The first sequence is highly significant in this respect, showing a group of demonstrators imprisoned by the urban web. Crushed by the high angle shots, confined by the edifices,

dismantled by the bus passing by, the demonstrators are forced to seek refuge and thus move away from the piazza, the core of the city. We begin with a rather long take which frames a large procession of demonstrators walking down the street. The high angle position of the camera suggests an observational staging which is then counterpoised by the non-diegetic score. The dramatic tone of the music creates more empathy in the viewing process, anticipating the emotional dynamics of the next shots. As the procession advances, the camera slightly cranes down, closely visualizing the mob of people. This camera movement is extremely interesting: on the one hand we move away from the simple observational patterns of the previous shots and thus enter the characters' world, while on the other we are exposed to the spatial construction of the city (streets, houses, shops, means of transportation). It is as if De Sica replaces the initial visual verticality (the high angle shots, the crane-shots are all instances of a vertical *mise-en-scène*) with a horizontally constructed camerawork that unfolds on the level of the human eye.

The rest of the sequence continues to highlight the bipolar structure people/city. Most of the low angle shots place the characters in front of the urban edifices as if imprisoned from behind the shoulders. The only noise we hear is the voice of the demonstrators (they ask for an increase in their salary) setting them apart from the surrounding space which, as the intertitle states, is rather quiet. In order to emphasize the realistic flow, De Sica employs a number of point of view shots from the demonstrators' perspective. The close range of the camera lenses creates an unsettling and claustrophobic texture. Interestingly all the demonstrators' shots are well balanced on the camera axis while the low angle of the sergeant's face or the long distance shots of the police arriving are either oblique or

strikingly angled. De Sica is thus creating separations and antinomies even within the same crowd. The last shot is a high angle (in a pattern of continuity with the beginning) which restores the previous observational staging, by simply showing the crowd's diaspora and thus introduces in the film a progressive sense of defeat. Overall, the cruciality of the sequence as a whole lies in its construction of social displacement and antithesis between the characters and the surrounding space.

As in *Ladri di Biciclette*, the wandering of the protagonist throughout the streets becomes a painful and distressing process of social externalization. Thus, what the film conveys is an extremely bleak dichotomy between Umberto and the city. Only on one occasion does De Sica allow his character to be in harmony with the city, in the sequence where the old man has left the hospital and rests in a public garden. Besides this little digression, each aspect of the city, from the streets to the main monuments, passing through the market stalls, functions not as a simple backdrop but as a mirror and reflection of the interior world of the community, and thus as a liminal space of inauthenticity and indifference. Central to *Umberto D.* (and to a lesser extent to *Ladri di Biciclette*) is the contrast open space / closed space (or in other terms restriction vs freedom). If the city is the spatial setting of De Sica's film, the obsession of imprisonment becomes the real signifier of that space. Closed spaces thus become miniatures of the open ones, or more generally microcosms through which the large urban spaces are reflected. Both open and closed spaces are shaped as signifiers of the community's and the individual's suffering. Among the enclosed spaces I shall concentrate on the two which best highlight the protagonist's predicament: the hospital and

Umberto's apartment. They are both meant to be seen as places of salvation, environments in which one tends to find protection or security, but as the film unfolds they hide the worst kind of hostility. Umberto's apartment becomes the paradigm of violation: it is in fact constantly invaded by other people and thus the old man's privacy is each time disrupted. In opposition to Umberto's domestic space, De Sica constructs the bourgeois apartment, symbol of a different inaccessible world. The corridor in-between connects Umberto's room and the maiden's (Maria) dormitory to the landlady's apartment, functioning then as the testimony of their subjection. Likewise, the hospital reproduces through its vertical structure an image of social hierarchy. At the top of this symbolic ladder De Sica places the surgeon's figure. Again, as in the case of the bourgeois family we get a sense of detachment: the chief physician rapidly moves from one patient to the next, evaluating their conditions. In this respect even within the walls of the hospital we witness the clash between social levels. In the middle (between the patients and the leading doctor) De Sica situates the nun's character who apparently cares for the patients but then uses the rosary for her own means.

As in the case of *Ladri di Biciclette* De Sica constructs a well structured mise-en-scène which emphasizes not only the distance between the protagonist and the community but also his detachment from the objects that surround him. It would be sufficient to mention De Sica's deep-focus cinematography which becomes the cinematic equivalent to Bennett's topographical analysis, in the ways it dilates and accentuates the spatial perspective, providing further separation between character and places. The spatial perspective thus becomes an essential parameter of Umberto's condition, one which is

duplicated to infinity. The ending itself employs this technique: after having failed to commit suicide, Umberto walks away in the far distance, with no place to go. This open finale (like the one in *Ladri di Biciclette* but much bleaker) creates a sort of poetic ambiguity which negates any hope or optimism. Together with the spatial perspective, the use of camera angle shapes the visual fulfilment. In this way, De Sica increases the sense of heaviness which accompanies Umberto's drama. The frequent high angle shots relegate the old man in a position of inferiority while the low angles of the edifices emphasize the sense of disproportion between the protagonist and the city's landscape. The long shot of the tram dazzling on the line creates a sort of opposition between the immobility of the space and the dynamic energy brought about by the advancements of technology. Furthermore, the tram can be seen as a sort of symbolic presence: with its metallic shrieks, it constantly disturbs Umberto's privacy, enhancing the sense of anxiety. The negative portrayal of this public transport can be generalized to all the other vehicles, which help to articulate the film's sense of indifference, visually translating the coldness of the character's condition.

It is now clear that every spatial element of the city is used in such a way to convey not only the protagonist's affliction but also a broader and larger modern tragedy, a common one to the contemporary dimension of Italian life.

The real strength of the two films (but this statement can be applied to other neorealist films made by the same De Sica - *Sciuscià* and *Miracolo a Milano*) thus lies not just in their aesthetic goals but in the way they manage to transcend regional boundaries, articulating a discourse both on a national level and on an international scale. The powerful transnational quality at

the core of the two films explains the fact that they have become, over the passing of years, part of the Italian National Treasure: people have always felt a sharp sense of historical and cultural heritage in the viewing process of these two masterpieces. The very “Italianness” of De Sica’s films thus does not impede a broader, transnational fulfilment: the events depicted in *Ladri di Biciclette* and *Umberto D.* have a cosmopolitan and an a-temporal dimension. In this way the image of the city becomes both a representation of Rome and a study of every city caught up in a crucial age of transition, or more generally in the discontinuities of history.

Conclusion

It is clear from the present study that both Bennett and De Sica, albeit in two different media, sculpt the treatment of space in a way that comports amicably with the narrative itself. Both authors share a plethora of common attitudes to the manipulation of characters and space, taking a step further towards a more truly cultural, intercultural, anthropologically-oriented, spatial narratology. Such narrative strategies ideally dovetail with de Certeau’s concept of our environment as an “instantaneous configuration of positions” (2002: 101), where space becomes our faithful standby in our task to make sense of and act in the environment that surrounds us. In imagining what events “mean”, we thus should not simply ask “what do they lead to in a causal chain?” but look more closely at where they happen and what this “where” means to those involved, be they readers, characters or narrators.

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