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The Skyscraper as Site of Social Anxiety. Investigating the Cinematic Representation of Milanese Skyscrapers (1954–1965)

Abstract

In the mid-1950s, the first skyscrapers emerged from the mass of low houses that sprawled over the metropolitan area of Milan. Iconic buildings such as Torre Velasca, Torre Pirelli, and Torre Galfa instantly defined a new phase of cultural, economic, and technological advancement. The image of the city was profoundly altered, transformed into a forward-looking icon of modernity. Italian cinema was quick to react to the change and immediately began to portray the new building type that was its center, depicting the social and cultural effects of its imposition on the fabric of the city. This paper investigates the ways in which Italian cinema represented the vertical city, arguing that skyscrapers brought about new values dictated by a capitalist and consumerist society that was burgeoning in Milan during the period. The study identifies three distinctive elements in the mise-en-scène of the high rises: lighting, air, and the elevator. Each depicts anxiety towards new architectural forms, and in doing so serves as a key to understanding contemporary social changes.

"The skyscraper has transformed the life of the Milanese. Mysterious activities take place in this vertical city, of which the horizontal city was unaware."[1] From his apartment on the tenth floor of a tall building in Piazza della Repubblica, painter and writer Alberto Savinio, pseudonym of Andrea de Chirico, younger brother of Giorgio de Chirico, grasped the radical metamorphosis skyscrapers engendered in the inhabitants of Milan. Writing his novel *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città* in 1943, amidst World War II and the bombings of that same year, Savinio foresaw in the early high-rises of the 1930s and early 1940s the potential impact that "unusually tall building[s]"[2] would have on the city. His fascination with tall buildings came with an appreciation and knowledge of the various aspects of the modern city, anticipating the ways in which skyscrapers would be viewed and depicted in the years to come. In this inquiry, Savinio's words serve as an entry point for the exploration of tactics deployed in cinema to represent skyscrapers as symbols of both technological progress and social and economic disruption.

This study aims to elucidate the ways in which architecture informs the cinematographic process by focusing on the skyscraper, a building type that is a distinctive feature of modernity. Following Merrill Schleier's definition of skyscraper cinema, I consider those films in which skyscrapers have an active role in the drama as opposed to being mere background elements of the mise-en-scène.[3] In my discussion, I outline three distinctive elements in the staging of Milanese skyscraper cinema: lighting, air, and the elevator. These components of the vertical panorama disguise a social anxiety towards modernity. The skyscraper is a disruptive building type, one which is in contrast to the historic urban forms of Milan. The signs of the old city's image, which will be addressed below, disappear in favor of a modernized version of the city seen from the skyscraper, or represented by its envelope – the façade.

This study spans the decade between the construction in 1954 of the first Milanese skyscraper, the Torre Breda, and the end of the Italian economic miracle. I discuss approximately a dozen fiction films of various genres, all set in Milan and released between 1954 and 1965. Although adopting chronological parameters from another discipline – architecture – can be hazardous, I consider Milanese cinema to be quite responsive in identifying and therefore in representing the effects skyscrapers produced on the inhabitants of Milan. I trace an evolution in the depiction of skyscrapers: from sites of social affirmation – *Ragazze d'oggi* (1955), *Nata di Marzo* (1956) – to the embodiment of relational crises – *La notte* (1961), *Milano nera* (1961) – to sources of emotional turmoil and mental breakdown – *La vita agra* (1963), *L'uomo dei cinque palloni* (1965).

This study builds on the recent interest in cinema and the city, since scholarship on this topic has flourished over the past twenty years. Starting in the mid-nineties, scholars from different disciplines, such as geography, history,

1 "Il grattacielo ha trasformato la vita dei milanesi. Misteriose attività si svolgono dentro queste città verticali, che la città orizzontale ignorava." Savinio 1944, p. 85.

2 Webster 1959, p. 126.

3 Schleier 2009, p. X.

4 The first edited collection in English on cinema and the city is *The Cinematic City* 1997. Studies on cinema and architecture often touch on the city. See, among those, *Cinéma et architecture* 1991; Puaux 1995; *Film Architecture* 1999; *Cinema & Architecture* 1997. Two volumes came out of a 1999 conference on cinema and the city held at the University College of Dublin: *Cinema and the City* 2001, and *Screening the City* 2003. Two studies focusing on European cities are Mazierska/Rascaroli 2003; and *Spaces in European Cinema* 2000. For a historical overview of cinema and the city, see Licata 2000; Barber 2002; Mennel 2008. Studies of modern and postmodern spaces in cinema are *Cities in Transition* 2008; AlSayyad 2006. A look at cinema and the city in the 1970s is found in Webb 2014. Other recent valuable studies include Casavola/Presicce/Santuccio 2001; *Il cinema, l'architettura* 2001; *The City and the Moving Image* 2010; Pratt/San Juan 2014; *Filming the City* 2016; *Cinematic Urban Geographies* 2017; Tobe 2017.

social science, and film studies, have contributed to a growing body of literature on cinema and the city.[4] Journals and book series have focused on the cinematic city and cinema and space,[5] attesting to the importance of the topic. I am particularly indebted to Merrill Schleier's *Skyscraper Cinema* (2009) for pioneering the systematic exploration of skyscrapers in their cinematic use and representation. This study attempts to fill the gap in Italian cinema scholarship with a consideration of skyscrapers as a site of modernity, building upon recent studies on cinematic and literary Milan during the economic boom. Graziano Tassi's *Milan: La capitale du miracle économique italien entre littérature et cinéma (1955–1965)* (2017) and Alessandro Bosco's *Milano, il grattacielo e la metropoli* (2021) are exemplary in their vast and heterogeneous corpus of cinematic, literary, architectural and philosophical texts by well-established figures such as Dino Buzzati, Gio Ponti, and Michelangelo Antonioni and lesser known ones like Enzo Paci and Enrico Filippini. Scott Joseph Budzynski's *Evoking the new city* (2020) provided a much needed architectural and urban approach to the Milan of the economic miracle, with a rich integration of artistic representations, in particular those on the high-rises, as attested in a long section dedicated to the literary and cinematic representation of skyscrapers in the postwar years. This study acknowledges the value of these works and aims to further the progression of studies on skyscrapers in cinema.

In the history of Milan since World War II there have been two waves of skyscraper construction: the first was initiated in the early fifties and lasted about ten years, while the second began in the early 2010s and continues up till the present.[6] In the mid-1930s, there had already been several instances of high-rise construction – the Torre Rasini (Gio Ponti, Emilio Lancia; 1933–1934; 50 m), Torre del Parco (Gio Ponti; 1933; 108.5 m) and Torre Snia Viscosa (Alessandro Rimini; 1935–1937; 59 m) – but it would only be twenty years later, with the inception of the economic miracle, that the first skyscrapers were built. The first wave began with the erection of the 116-meter Torre Breda (Eugenio and Ermenegildo Soncini, Luigi Mattioni; 1954), initially called "Grattacielo di Milano" (Milan's Skyscraper). The Torre Breda was the first skyscraper not simply because it was taller than older buildings, but because it was the first to surpass to the statue of the *Madonnina* set at 108.50 meters above ground, on the highest spire of the Duomo. For almost two centuries, the *Madonnina* by sculptor Giuseppe Perego and goldsmith Giuseppe Bini had stood on the highest point of the city; it would come to act as a vertical margin between preexisting buildings and skyscrapers in Milan. As Sandro, the protagonist of *Nata di Marzo*, explains to his girlfriend in the elevator of the Torre del Parco, an urban regulation in Milan prohibited any new building to be higher than the *Madonnina*.[7] The surpassing of the *Madonnina* thus represented the end of *immobilismo* and the strong ties to tradition that until that date had characterized the architectural and urban planning policies of Milan and other large cities in Italy.

Before this time, Milan was known as a city of small buildings over which the Duomo appeared to soar. In 1816, Stendhal described Milan as "a flat city made of low houses".[8] Stopping in Milan during a trip to Europe and the Holy Land in 1867, Mark Twain was impressed by the Duomo's "forest of graceful needles" that

5 For journal collections presenting general approaches, see, among others, *Cityscapes* 1997; *East-West Film Journal* 1988; and Penz et al. 2003. Recent book series dealing with the cinematic city and cinema and space include *World Film Locations* (Intellect), *Screening Space* (Palgrave Macmillan), and *Mediated Cities* (Intellect).

6 See Irace 2021.

7 Because of this law, Gio Ponti designed the Torre del Parco to be 108 meters in height, half a meter lower than the *Madonnina*.

8 "[…] una città piatta fatta di case basse," Veronesi 1959, p. 79.

"rose slowly above pygmy housetops."[9] The literary image of a low-built Milan revealed its lack of identifying characteristics or monuments, apart from a few exceptions like the Duomo and La Scala Opera House. The appearance of skyscrapers in Milan as opposed to other Italian cities might be seen as related to the scarcity of man-made or natural features. In 1915, Benito Mussolini wrote a short article in his newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, calling for Milan to embrace the skyscraper, because the city "doesn't have a river, doesn't have a hill, doesn't have a lake, doesn't have […] the sea, it will content itself with […] a port. It has only a canal."[10] He continues, stating: "I'm for the skyscraper, for skyscrapers; I'm for an entire urban quarter of skyscrapers. Milan must have them, and quickly. I've never understood why builders have to stop at a certain number of stories."[11]

Mussolini's view of Milan as a city without defining features was shared by many urbanists and architects during the 1900s. In the mid-fifties, Milanese architect Piero Bottoni noted that Milan was "the only large city in the world that doesn't rise on the banks of the sea, a lake, on a mountain, on a river,"[12] in relation to the risk of urban sprawl and building speculation in a vast, flat terrain with an absence of geographical obstacles. Gio Ponti considered Milan a city that God almost forgot, "unlike other cities in the world" which were gifted with natural features that made their fortunes, "like Rome with its hills, Genoa with the sea, or Naples with the islands and Vesuvius."[13] Therefore, and with little humility, Ponti suggested that architects like himself had the responsibility of transforming Milan into a beautiful city. This endeavor, according to Ponti, could be achieved in part thanks to the erection of skyscrapers, which should be grouped in a series of small 'islands' located not far from one another. Ponti's idea would take shape only in the 2010s with the second wave of construction in the Porta Nuova and Citylife districts.[14]

The advent of skyscrapers radically changed the image of Milan that had crystallized in the popular imagination. Their proliferation in the 1950s coincided with the start of the economic boom fueled by manufacturing, global markets, finance, and major corporations. Milan rushed to build high: the erection of skyscrapers constituted a second stage of reconstruction after the first stage immediately following the Second World War. A quality associated with the skyscraper was its self-promotional nature; the building itself was the symbol of a company which saw in this building type the possibility of expressing and communicating its economic and technological potency. For example, thanks to a vast media campaign, the Torre Pirelli (Gio Ponti, Pier Luigi Nervi; 1956–1958; 127m) had become the symbol and embodiment of Milanese entrepreneurship and therefore of the economic miracle.[15] For these reasons, most skyscrapers performed tertiary functions; when hosting apartments, a skyscraper came to embody wealth, as it does with the protagonists of *Ragazze d'oggi*, *La notte*, and *Nata di Marzo*.

In sum, we have two forces facing each other: the old, historic city represented by low houses on one side, and the modern city represented by the

9 Twain (1869) 2007, p. 290.

10 "[…] non ha un fiume, non ha un colle, non ha un lago, non ha […] il mare, si contenterà di avere […] un porto. Ha soltanto un canale," Mussolini 1915. Mussolini wrote this article under the nickname "Un uomo qualunque." It was the first entry of an editorial column entitled "Una al giorno."

11 "Io sono per il grattacielo, per i grattacieli; io sono per un intero quartiere di grattacieli. Milano deve averli e presto. Non ho mai capito perché il costruttore debba fermarsi a un certo numero di piani." Mussolini 1915.

12 "[…] l'unica grande città del mondo che non sorga sul mare, su un lago, su una montagna, su un fiume." Bottoni (1953) 1995, p. 304.

13 Ponti 1961.

14 On the Porta Nuova district, see *Storie del grattacielo* 2020, pp. 66–83.

15 See *Storie del grattacielo* 2020.

high-rises and skyscrapers on the other. These forces, as Savinio had suggested, defined themselves along either the horizontal or the vertical axis. This contrast is evident in most of the films we are considering here. In *La vita agra,* the verticality of the skyscraper contrasts with the horizontality of living and moving in the streets, as when during his walk around the city, Bianchi is hindered by cars, both parked and in transit, and by manholes for the construction of the subway. Grotesquely, Bianchi is even taken to the police station and indicted for aimless walking. Indeed, the struggle to traverse the city is a leitmotiv of the cinema of those years. For instance, the two protagonists of *Il Posto* are scolded because they run in the park, and they too must circumvent the same enormous manholes facilitating subway construction below street level. In an unpublished version of the screenplay of *La notte*, Lidia, on her walk in the outskirts of the city, points to the skyscrapers "that rise over some cracked walls" and tells Giovanni that soon everything will change.[16] The aluminum, reinforced concrete and glass skyscrapers that constitute the scenery of the first part of Lidia's *flânerie* are erased by the low brick walls with the broken plaster of the city outskirts. In *Ragazze d'oggi*, as Scott J. Budzynski has rightly suggested, the skyscraper is the incarnation of the future of the newly engaged couple, while the low houses of the Navigli constitute the space associated with the girls' father and aunt, still tied to antiquated traditions.[17]

In Milanese skyscraper cinema, the skyscraper acts, as Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas puts it, as "the great metropolitan destabilizer: it promises perpetual programmatic instability."[18] This destabilization was also noted in the publications of the time that documented the transformation from the old to the new city. As the title alone makes clear, in *Addio Vecchia Milano, Buondì Milano Nuova* (1962) Eligio Possenti placed what he believed to be a difficult relationship between tradition and modernity at the heart of the matter, in both the text and in the vast color photographic repertoire.[19] In the second half of the 1950s, three city guides on modern architecture – Piero Bottoni's *Edifici moderni in Milano* (1954), Gio Ponti's *Milano Oggi* (1957), and Roberto Aloi's *Nuove Architetture a Milano* (1959) – asserted that there was a need to understand, catalog and investigate the significant new building projects that the city was welcoming into its midst.

The problematic relationship with tradition and the past of the city was at the center of the debate on the construction of skyscrapers as well, and saw a dialogue between Gio Ponti promoting his Torre Pirelli on the one hand, and Ernesto Nathan Rogers endorsing the Torre Velasca (BBPR; 1955–1957; 106m) on the other.[20] The Torre Pirelli embraced modernist, abstract forms and innovative materials, introducing the International Style to Milan. Considered the other symbol of postwar Milan along with the Torre Pirelli, the Torre Velasca through its architectural style rebutted Modernism in favor of a return to Milan's historical aesthetics. This skyscraper evoked the forms of a medieval tower like those of the Castello Sforzesco, the façade's light brown tones bringing to mind the medieval city and the columns bearing the upper section recalling the Duomo's buttresses. The two skyscrapers were compared and contrasted extensively in national and international architectural publications as two ways of

16 "[…] che si alzano su alcuni muri screpolati […]" Archivio Fotografico delle Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Ferrara, Ferrara, Fondo Michelangelo Antonioni, B. 8A/28 fasc. 28, Michelangelo Antonioni, "La notte. Sceneggiatura completa [1959–1960]," 1959–1960.

17 Budzynski 2020, p. 139.

18 Koolhaas (1978) 1994, p. 87.

19 See Possenti 1968.

20 For a discussion of the Torre Pirelli and the Torre Velasca, see Melograni 2015, pp. 170–181.

thinking about the modern forms of Italian architecture in relation to its past; they were the two Italian vernaculars of contemporary architecture.

But was the skyscraper really a "destabilizer," as Koolhaas defined it? In his 1955 article on Milan, then taken up by Ponti in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, the English architectural critic Furneaux Jordan did not see an antithesis between modernity and Italianness, dubbing the new Milan both the "most modern city in the world" and "the most Italian thing in Italy."[21] Furneaux held that it was wrong to build in the old way, following outdated architectural styles, because it was fundamentally erroneous to consider a building old or new. "Milan's skyscrapers," Jordan continued, "are history being born."[22] Investigations into the shape of the city of the past and the city to come must be addressed here in relation to the cinematic narratives and aesthetics that are central to how this urbanization unfolded. By investigating the kind of attention the skyscrapers received, it will be possible to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the image of modern Milan was conceived.

Lighting

Skyscrapers disrupted the old Milan not only with their massive footprints and heights, but also with the glaring lights of office spaces and advertisements. In Milanese skyscraper cinema, electric lighting was a major component in the representation of modernity. Among the various types of electric lights, fluorescent lamps symbolized the technological progress of the modern age.[23] In particular, the fluorescent lights of office spaces and advertisements embodied capitalist and consumerist Milanese society. It was in the facades of these buildings that fluorescent lighting found its most iconic cinematic depiction.

In discussing the importance of lighting in the cinematic representation of the disruption and changes occurring in Milan with the construction of skyscrapers it is useful to adopt the classification of lights proposed in 1952 by lighting designer Richard Kelly. Kelly's approach was based on three primary methods, which corresponded to three forms of light: focal glow, ambient luminescence, and play of brilliants. In this classification, Kelly recognized the power of light to alter space and produce a feeling of visual awareness that may elicit a variety of emotional responses in viewers.[24]

I am particularly interested in two of the three forms of light delineated by Kelly, that is "ambient luminescence" and "play of brilliants, because they represent an urban space that is either old and traditional, or new and modern, respectively. Play of brilliants is the embodiment of the light of the new city. It "excites the optic nerves […] stimulates the body and spirit. […] It is distracting and entertaining."[25] It is a light that not only illuminates a space but is a spectacle in and of itself; it is a source of information that contains a description of the space. Play of brilliants is the form of light that best describes the fluorescent lighting depicted in the Milanese skyscraper cinema. In considering first the fluorescent lightning used for advertisements, we find the "distracting" and "entertaining" qualities of play of brilliants in one of the final scenes of *La vita agra*, in which marketing strategist Luciano Bianchi (Ugo Tognazzi) comes up with the idea of promoting his company by using the entire skyscraper façade for a light show. Bianchi's lighting stunt features rockets, firecrackers, and pinwheels installed

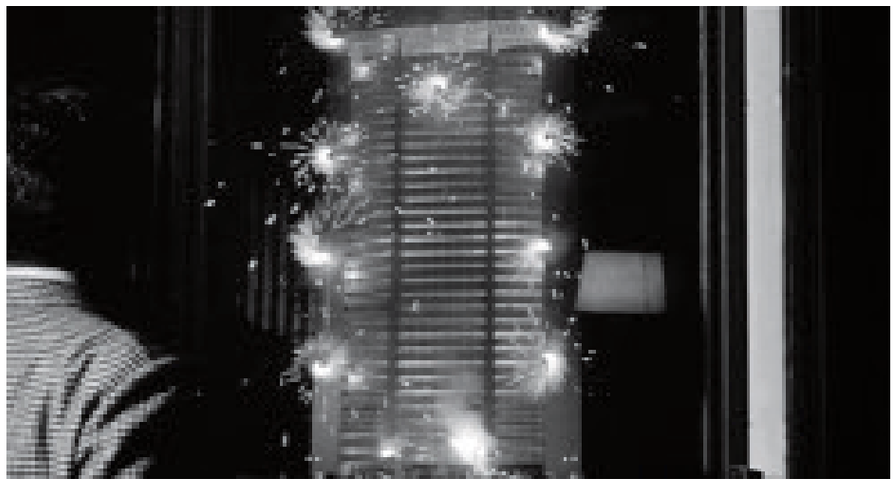
21 Furneaux Jordan 1955, p. 2.

22 Furneaux Jordan 1955, p. 2.

23 Fluorescent tubes were mass-produced and commercialized in the United States in the 1940s, arriving in Italy in the 1950s.

24 Kelly 1952, p. 25.

25 Kelly 1952, p. 25.



1 *La vita agra*, Director Carlo Lizzani, Italy 1964, film still (copyright Ripley's Home Video)

along the façade, as well as the office lights turned on with a wave effect from ground to top floor. Being part of the choreography for the promotion of the company, the office lights are no longer functional for the work of the company employees, but serve for the entertainment of the citizens, to use Kelly's words, to "excite the optic nerves."[26] The façade becomes a surface for entertainment and pleasure for the eyes. This lighting choreography is the culmination of the image of the skyscraper as an advertising object because it combines light paraphernalia installed on the façade and the illumination from the office spaces. The skyscraper morphs into a support for advertisement. The resulting play of light is a farce, almost an ironic and satirical mockery of the neon advertising of Milan. It is also a caricature of the huge advertising campaign of the Torre Pirelli that made it the symbol of the economic miracle. The skyscraper, a building which was already created with the intention of publicizing the client company, is now ever more deeply entrenched in its promotional role (fig. 1).

The sensationalizing and overwhelming lighting produced by Bianchi in *La vita agra* is almost equal to the color-rich neon signs visible in the nocturnal treasure hunt scene of Luigi Zampa's *Ragazze d'oggi* (1955). The "Times Square at night" that Kelly proposed as an example of the liveliness and entertainment of the lights of play of brilliants is very much like the Milan of those years, due to the large number of neon advertisements posted on many of the city's buildings. The treasure hunt around the streets of Milan in *Ragazze d'oggi* is peculiar because the luminous advertisements are no longer relegated to the background of the *mise-en-scène*, as had been the case in many establishing shots of Milanese skyscraper cinema. Here, they take on a leading role in the story. In fact, the solution to the first clue of the treasure hunt – "Where the *panettone* has more light because it's bigger"[27] – is an example of a neon advertisement, in this case for a Milanese bakery, placed on the façade of Palazzo Carminati opposite the Duomo. The luminous writings on Palazzo Carminati are therefore integral elements of the narrative, part of the actions and movements of the protagonists in Milan. Furthermore, the beginning and end of the treasure hunt, with the announcement of the winner, take place in front of the enormous Cinzano liqueur neon sign, illuminating the extreme consumerism of a wealthy society. The young, upper-class participants mix well with the visual and luminous context of Milan at night depicted in the ads. Furthermore, the advertisements delocalize the Milanese reality to morph into a generic, international site characterized by the

26 Kelly 1952, p. 25.
27 Orig. "Dove il panettone ha più luce perché è più grande".

names and logos of international brands. Though alien to the citizens, these elements engage their attention (figs. 2–3).

The "distracting" qualities of the play of brilliants are evident in Mario Monicelli's episode *Renzo e Luciana* in the anthology film *Boccaccio '70* (1962). In this episode, neon advertisement is a source of distraction and a sign of intrusion into the private sphere. Newlyweds Renzo and Luciana cannot afford a place of their own and have to live with Luciana's parents. One evening after dinner, unable to find a quiet place inside the crowded apartment, the couple go out on the balcony for a peaceful and intimate moment. The quiet is interrupted by a bright neon advertisement on their own balcony, installed with the approval of Luciana's family in exchange for a low economic return: a 10% discount on the products of the company. The scene recalls the novella "Luna e Gnac" in the short stories collection *Marcovaldo* (1963) by Italo Calvino, who was among the screenwriters of *Renzo e Luciana*. In *Renzo e Luciana*, the neon-lit advertisement – a form of light pollution – acts as a device that hinders communication between the two lovers. Furthermore, the intimate space of the balcony now recalls Renzo and Luciana's work space, since the intermittent lighting is a reminiscence of the repetitiveness of the intensive factory production that the two lovers must adhere to in their daily working routine (fig. 4).

2 *Ragazze d'oggi*, Director Luigi Zampa, Italy 1955, film still (copyright Minerva Film)

3 *Ragazze d'oggi*, Director Luigi Zampa, Italy 1955, film still (copyright Minerva Film)

The allure of neon advertisement is also evidenced in Marco Ferreri's *L'uomo dei cinque palloni* (1965). The obsessive-compulsive Mario Fuggetta (Marcello Mastroianni) chooses to take his life by jumping out the window of his apartment high up in a tall modern building. In his departure from life, Mario runs to the window revealing the neon advertisement of an angel with a *panettone* on the opposite building. The image of an angel, a spiritual being gifted with the ability to fly, makes Fuggetta's tragic end even more ironic. Instead of helping the treasure hunt in *Ragazze d'oggi* to move forward, the neon *panettone* advertisement is the element that ends the narrative (fig. 5).

Kelly developed a new language of architectural lighting that dealt with the complexity of such modern materials as steel, glass, and concrete. Kelly himself became a prominent light designer thanks in part to his collaboration with such architects as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson. In the mid-fifties, among his many commissions, he designed the light works of the Seagram Building in New York, one of the most iconic skyscrapers in the world. The image of illuminated skyscrapers acquired an important role in the depiction of modern architecture thanks to the work of Kelly, and Milanese skyscraper cinema attempted to replicate the powerful images of American skyscrapers depicted in Hollywood films.

In the case of office spaces, lighting was visible from the exterior thanks to the adoption of the curtain wall, a façade made of glass and aluminum, which does not bear the weight of the building.[28] Instead of light produced by distinct elements, the illuminated ceilings of the modernist office buildings were designed to create homogeneous lighting. Pasolini, whose cinema has always been seen as reflecting the image of postwar Rome, gave us a powerful literary representation of lit skyscrapers in Milan. He wrote a screenplay entitled *La nebbiosa* (1958–1960) for a film he never actually directed, about the outing of Mi-

28 For an overview of the curtain wall in the Italian context during the Postwar period, see Poretti 2009.

4 Episode "Renzo e Luciana" of the film *Boccaccio 70*, Director Mario Monicelli, Italy 1962, film still (copyright Cineriz)

5 *L'uomo dei cinque palloni*, Director Marco Ferreri, Italy/France 1965 (1969 released as the director's cut *Break up*), film still (copyright Champion-Les Films Concordia)

lanese youths called the Teddy Boys during New Year's Eve. The screenplay contains one of the most vivid, and cinematic, descriptions of the light effects of Milanese skyscrapers. In his depiction of the nocturnal urban space, Pasolini was overwhelmed by the sight of "the immense, luminous blocks of the Galfa and Pirelli skyscrapers […] They seem phosphorescent in the milky darkness".[29] Pasolini noticed the harsh contrast between the old and the new built environment: "Beyond the Naviglio, there are the ruins of old, gutted houses, with empty, ogling windows, and corners full of a fearful darkness: behind that mass of rubble, the silhouettes of four or five skyscrapers shine: the Galfa, the Pirelli, etc. They are stupendous images: they blaze with lights like gigantic diamonds, like colossal petrified ghosts."[30]

Although Pasolini did not want anyone to use his screenplay *La nebbiosa*, he was helpless to prevent Gian Rocco's and Pino Serpi's *Milano Nera*, which was partially based on his screenplay. For our discussion on the representation of lighting, I would like to examine one scene set below the Torre Galfa and Torre Pirelli, where three bored girlfriends are hanging out. It is a desolate urban landscape, no pedestrians outside, no cars around. At one point, they look up, magnetized by the "magical radiance"[31] of the crystal walls. They discuss the way these illuminated facades resemble "composizioni astratte," comparing them to the artwork of Klee, Kandinsky, and Mondrian. They marvel at the majestic beauty of such an urban vision; in their eyes, the buildings become two-dimensional surfaces. The architectural component is lost, as is the stylistic specificity of the two skyscrapers. The glass walls allow the passage of light from inside to outside and vice versa, creating visual arrangements that were completely novel to the Italian urban landscape. The alternating montage of shots that descend along each skyscraper and the uniform indoor office neon lights that imbue them with brightness blend the two skyscrapers together in the darkness of the night. The glass façade turns into "an inclosure [*sic*] that is space in itself, an inclosure that divides and at the same time links."[32] The façade's transparency allows for the expansion of space and the contiguity of outdoor and indoor volumes, promoting "simultaneous perception of different spatial locations."[33] The architectural features that make them recognizable as part of the Milanese urban context are "dissolved in light."[34] Furthermore, the absence of historic buildings in the surrounding urban context leads to a loss of the local in favor of a universal space inhabited only by young people (fig. 6).

29 "[…] gli immensi blocchi luminosi dei grattacieli Galfa, Pirelli […] Sembrano come fosforescenti, nel buio lattiginoso." Pasolini (1959) 2013, pp. 112–113.

30 "Oltre il Naviglio, ci sono delle rovine di vecchie case sventrate, con le finestre vuote, occhieggianti, e angoli colmi d'un buio pauroso: dietro quell'ammasso di macerie, splendono le sagome di quattro cinque grattacieli: il Galfa, il Pirelli ecc. Sono immagini stupende: sfolgorano di luci come giganteschi diamanti, come colossali fantasmi pietrificati." Pasolini (1959) 2013, p. 83.

31 Gobard as quoted in Benjamin 1999, p. 564.

32 Kiesler 1937, p. 55.

33 Képes 1944, p. 77.

34 Alfred Gotthold Meyer as quoted in Benjamin 1999, p. 541.

6 *Milano nera*, Directors Gian Rocco and Pino Serpi, Italy 1961, film still (copyright Mediolanum Film)

7 *La corruzione*, Director Mauro Bolognini, Italy 1961, film still (copyright ARCO Film)

The intense fascination the three girls in *Milano nera* feel for the illuminated façade is equal to that of Stefano in Mauro Bolognini's *La corruzione* (1963). In *La corruzione*, the offices lit up at night convey the victory of capitalism over Stefano's pure and gentle soul. Stefano, crushed by the fact that his shrewd father has covered up the suicide of one of his employees, can no longer face his father's greed and ruthlessness. In the long final sequence, he wanders brooding through the lonely nocturnal streets of Milan to arrive at the glass buildings of his father's company. The building shines from the inside out because each office level has luminous ceilings. Stefano gazes upon the façade as if attempting to grasp the emotional turmoil that led to the employee's fatal gesture, with no response. The façade is the embodiment of his father, a figure to which Stefano tries, unsuccessfully, to reconnect. The façade acts as a surface that attracts Stefano and at the same time repels him (fig. 7).

In concluding this section, I want to go back to the three forms of light outlined by Kelly, and consider "ambient luminescence" as the counterpart of "play of brilliants" in a discourse between old and new urban forms. Kelly regards ambient luminescence as the kind of light that distributes general lighting to the environment, making human beings and objects visible. He gives as examples "the uninterrupted light of a snowy morning in the open country" and the "foglight at sea in a small boat."[35] These examples both feature natural atmospheric phenomena: snow and fog, which are central to the depiction of Milan in Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960). *Rocco* is a key text for our discussion because it acts as a counterpart to Milanese skyscraper cinema; it embodies the characteristics of ambient luminescence, while depicting Milan as untouched

35 Kelly 1952, p. 25

by modern construction. Since Kelly regards ambient luminescence as "reassuring" and "restful," I consider this sentiment to belong to a moment in time before the irruption of modern forms, and along with them, hectic and distracting lights – the play of brilliants.

Visconti wanted to represent the old city before the disruption brought by modern forms, and he therefore eliminated skyscrapers and other modern buildings. Although the economic miracle is present in the film – the story is about immigrants from the South who relocate to Milan for employment opportunities in the factories – the film lacks portrayals of the city's modern architecture. This absence is also attested in the lack of fluorescent light in favor of a mix of soft and natural lighting, formed by the electric lights of light poles and atmospheric phenomena like fog and snow. *Rocco*'s light expresses the old urban forms of the city, which Visconti preferred as a backdrop to his story.

In one scene the four brothers walk to work early in the morning, excited by their first experience of snow. The sun has not yet risen, the streets are still empty of people. The light is very delicate and diffused thanks to the reflection of the street lamp light falling on the snowflakes and snowy ground. In another scene of *Rocco*, shot at daylight, the camera captures the Naviglio immersed in dense fog. The hour of the day is hard to determine. The light is very warm and absorbed by the buildings and streets in the scene. These two scenes are examples of a light, which, to quote Kelly one last time, "quiets the nerves and is restful."[36] This light, rendered by director of photography Giuseppe Rotunno, expands the space, creates a dense atmosphere, gives a sense of out-of-timeness to the events, "suggests the freedom of space and can suggest infinity" (figs. 8–9).[37]

8 *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, Director Luchino Visconti, Italy 1960, film still (copyright Titanus)

9 *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, Director Luchino Visconti, Italy 1960, film still (copyright Titanus)

Air

The transparent glass of the curtain wall façade allowed the passage of light from inside to outside and vice versa, creating a new electric and glowing landscape. At the same time, this layer of glass, aluminum, and steel prevented the internal air from mixing with the external air, creating two distinct climatic environments. The skyscrapers' skin became the surface onto which the anxieties of the changing society were projected. Outside, the city experienced high levels of pollution from cars and the factories in suburban areas, and a constant, dense bank of fog; inside the air was regulated to create a toxin-free, temperature-controlled environment that detached those within from the external world. The desire to keep the polluted air out and to have a regulated temperature led to a sharp division between inside and outside. In Milanese skyscraper cinema, we can attest a clear-cut contrast between the indoor air of tall buildings and the outdoor air of the city. Milanese skyscraper cinema represented the internal microclimate of skyscrapers and showed the effects of the regulated air on the inhabitants.

The appearance of fluorescent lighting in modern cities coincided with the implementation of air-conditioning.[38] The lower heat produced by fluorescent lighting over incandescent lamps allowed air-conditioning to operate at a reasonable cost.[39] The skyscrapers' indoor climate was regulated by impressive air plants that produced clean, temperature-controlled air throughout the building. In 1954, the Torre Breda was the first building granted the liberty to defy regulations that called for natural air circulation.[40] *La vita agra* is first and foremost the film that uses air as a central element in the discourse regarding the disruption of modernity in urban life. In order to avenge the death of a miner occasioned by his company's negligence, Bianchi plans to destroy the company's skyscraper, symbol of its economic power; he devises a plan to put a bomb in the climatic plant in the basement. The climatic plant is represented as the operating engine of the skyscraper, the heart that pumps the lifeblood to the large building: pipes of various sizes occupy the floor, ceiling, and walls of the basement and resemble veins, vital conduits that constitute the sustenance system of the glass and steel organism. In Bianchi's scheme, air conditioning becomes a bearer of death as much as does polluted air. In his plot to destroy the machine that cleans and regulates the air and therefore sabotage the skyscraper, Bianchi aims at returning to an earlier Milan in which air cannot be controlled and skyscrapers are absent: a pre-capitalistic Milan. In the end, Bianchi's revolutionary, anti-capitalist spirit disappears with his inclusion in the skyscraper working system, an engine which recruits him as one of its essential components, that is, as director of the creative area for the promotion of the company's image. Bianchi experiences a split in his personality: in the high-rise he becomes accustomed to the capitalist dynamics, which, at the same time, he rejects and struggles against by living in a rental house or when he returns for a visit to his native town. In the skyscraper, Bianchi is transformed: he preaches the perks of marketing strategies in front of the symbol of Milan, the Duomo, challenging what was once the city's tallest building (fig. 10).

In *La vita agra*, air is also the medium that connects different spaces.[41] Internal communications take place via air-compressed tubes, which are used to send letters and other forms of messages, satisfying the company's ambition to be self-sufficient. Air is an agent that promotes the movement of inanimate objects.

36 Kelly 1952, p. 25.
37 Kelly 1952, p. 25.
38 On the history of, and relation between, air-conditioning and fluorescent lamps, see Leslie et al. 2018, pp. 81–84.
39 Banham 1984, p. 182.
40 Cecchi 1995, p. 453.

10 *La vita agra*, Director Carlo Lizzani, Italy 1964, film still (copyright Ripley's Home Video)

11 *La vita agra*, Director Carlo Lizzani, Italy 1964, film still (copyright Ripley's Home Video)

12 *L'uomo dei cinque palloni*, Director Marco Ferreri, Italy/France 1965 (1969 released as the director's cut *Break up*), film still (copyright Champion-Les Films Concordia)

Air-compressed tubes, whose function Bianchi cannot at first understand, detach him from his fellow colleagues. Air, from being an element that unifies all living beings, a shared product of the environment, turns out to be also that which separates individuals (fig. 11).

The controlled, sanitized air inside the skyscraper prevents its inhabitants from feeling sensations like heat or cold, conditions of being alive, of existing in the air.[42] In *La vita agra*, air-conditioning seems to negatively affect the company's employees, who act, move and speak as if they are robotic beings deprived of their soul. The spectators observe a shift in the inhabitants of Milan, from the protesters in the opening scene, with their lively energy and passion for their cause, to the rigid, detached employees of Bianchi's company. Regulated air seems not only to calibrate the climate to a specific temperature, but also the minds of the employees in the skyscraper.

In *L'uomo dei cinque palloni*, the exploration of the significance of air is pushed to its extreme consequences. Fuggetta is obsessed with establishing the maximum quantity of air a balloon can hold before it explodes, an obsession that leads him to take his life by jumping from his apartment in a high-rise. In the film, air is a tangible presence, a balloon that symbolizes the high levels of anxiety in the consumer society. Mario's extreme gesture is a vertical action that materializes by exploiting the building's elevation. Mario's suicide, a leap from the window, suggests that the only way to free oneself from an obsession with air is that of a vertical descent. Furthermore, his suicide results in the destruction of a passerby's car, a luxury item of a consumer society represented at the moment of its greatest vitality – during the Christmas shopping season (fig. 12).

The attempt to control air – its temperature, humidity, cleansing function, e.g. – was an attempt to regulate the unpredictability of fog, with its imbalanced quantities of water, air, and external pollution. Fog changes the shape and image of a city, transforming its volumes and proportions of full and empty spaces. The uneven skyline produced by the erection of skyscrapers was condemned by architects like Piero Bottoni, who saw fog as an element that could unify "the tall houses adjoining the dwarf houses," giving "unity among the relationships of spaces and volumes," ultimately creating "a unified and balanced organism."[43] Bottoni's idea went against the notions of skyscraper advocates, such as Ponti, who considered the beauty and uniqueness of Milan to lie in the contrast between different volumes, small houses and skyscrapers. In this sense, fog represented a threat for skyscrapers by making them disappear in its vapor. Fog had always been one of the city's most identifiable traits, and so the vertical Milan that was forming at this time had to struggle against the old image of a foggy city.

Air pollution was less visible than fog, but was made visual through the depiction of cars and traffic in films such as *La notte* and *La vita agra*. In the latter

41 I am indebted to Eva Horn's concept of "air as medium," see Horn 2018.

42 Horn 2018, p. 19.

43 "[…] le case alte, attigue alle case nane," "unitarietà tra i rapporti fra spazi e volume," "un organismo unitario ed equilibrato," Bottoni (1954) 1995, p. 317.

film, cars occupy so much space that Bianchi and other pedestrians are unable to find even the space to walk. With the construction of factories and the commercialization of cars on a vast scale, air pollution increased to alarming levels beginning in the early 1960s. Furthermore, air pollution is directly related to the skyscrapers because often the companies who built them also owned factories that polluted the air, such as Pirelli and Montecatini.

Elevator

"The elevators await you open, lit up like theaters. […] You enter the lift of the skyscraper like you do the enchanted houses of an amusement park […] the lift departs slowly like a ship leaving the port, takes off, and then gradually stabilizes in the regular, pulsating movement of the sea of the ascent. Then you can sit down, think about your future or, as I do, write to the woman you love."[44] Savinio casts the elevator ride to the fifteenth floor as a long and romantic journey. The elevator-boat gives the sensation of a slow and gentle exploration of unknown places full of glowing lights and unexpected attractions. In the short time frame from the 1940s to the late 1950s, the innovations that took place led to a very different experience of the elevator. Savinio's romantic image of it as a contemplative place that allowed him to immerse himself in his thoughts and desires, was soon to be forgotten.

In Milanese skyscraper cinema, the elevator has three narrative functions. First and foremost, it is a dramaturgic device that serves as a metaphor of professional and economic ascent, as in *La vita agra* and *Ragazze d'oggi*. Often, this climb comes about in a deceitful way, by threatening people's lives, as in *Il vedovo* and *Cronaca di un amore*. Furthermore, in the elevator, social relations are spatially organized and rendered legible to the spectator, who is thereby able to grasp the relationship between topography and the social panorama of the time. The elevator thus acts as a locale where class consciousness merges with corporeal condition. Vertical transit is also a display of a technological innovation that disrupts lives and leads to mental instability, as in *La notte* and *L'uomo dei cinque palloni*. Lastly, the elevator acts as a privileged locale in which one can observe the city from an elevated, mobile, omniscient site, as evidenced in *Nata di marzo* and *La notte*.

In *La vita agra*, the elevator is the embodiment of the mutable, unstable relationship Bianchi has with his company. Bianchi's successful motto for a product placement is warmly greeted by the CEO, who meets with him in an elevator that has been furnished with chairs, plants, a painting, and a coffee table. The transformation of the elevator into a work space, an office where the CEO receives his employees, attests to the importance of a platform that it is not only a device to move people up and down, but also a place to talk business and attend meetings. The elevator is a metaphor for career advancement – after the elevator ride, Bianchi receives a promotion and a new, higher-level office from which he can enjoy a view of the city and the Duomo.

If upward movement signifies career advancement, downward mobility attests to Bianchi's hostile sentiment towards his work place. In a scene of *La vita agra* that was never shot but is found in the screenplay, Bianchi takes the elevator to go to the typography floor, but as he is about to press the necessary button, a hand from behind presses the button for the basement, where the air system is

44 "Gli ascensori ti aspettano aperti, illuminati come teatrini. […] Si entra nell'ascensore del grattacielo come nelle case incantate dei lunaparchi […] l'ascensore parte lentamente come nave che esce dal porto, prende l'abbrivio e indi a poco si stabilizza nella marcia regolare e pulsante dell'altomare dell'ascesa. Tu allora ti puoi sedere, pensare al tuo avvenire o, come fo io, scrivere alla donna amata." Savinio 1944, p. 85.

13 *Il vedovo*, Director Dino Risi, Italy 1959, film still (copyright Medusa Italy)

located. The hand is that of the ghost of Otello, the dead miner for whom Bianchi is seeking revenge. Otello pushes Bianchi to focus on the main reason he has gotten himself hired by the company, which is to bring down the company skyscraper by putting a bomb in the air system. The *mise-en-scène* features an elevator outfitted with mirrors so that Bianchi cannot escape the severe, impassive gaze of Otello. In the end, Bianchi chooses the upper floor over the basement, and accepts the position of head of advertisement in place of getting revenge for the dead miner.

The elevator as the embodiment of the professional ladder of success in *La vita agra* has a similar narrative function in *Il vedovo*, in which it performs as an instrument for economic gain. In order to secure his rich wife's inheritance, Alberto Nardi (Alberto Sordi) uses his position as the owner of a company that manufactures elevator braking systems to plot the murder of his wife Elvira Almiraghi (Franca Valeri), by making her fall into the elevator shaft of the Torre Velasca where they reside. In presenting the plan for her elimination to his workers, Nardi uses a scaled-down model of the real elevator. The reduction in size gives him control and power over the device, lending him a technological advantage over his wife. Nevertheless, the plan will fail and Nardi will be the one who loses his life. The skyscraper is the embodiment of Elvira's economic and social power, since she is the owner of the apartment, while the elevator manifests Nardi's desire to secure his wife's inheritance. His attempt to sabotage the elevator's machinery is a way of gaining control over the skyscraper. The opening scene portrays Nardi's alienation from the skyscraper: he paces before its entrance, while recounting a dream from the previous night, in which he attended his wife's funeral with a smile on his face (fig. 13).

Murder in the elevator shaft was already a trope in Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amore* (1950). In the early days of their acquaintance, lovers Paola (Lucia Bosè) and Guido (Massimo Girotti) played a part in the tragic accident of Giovanna, Guido's fiancée, who stepped into the shaft while the cab was on another floor. Guido deliberately did not warn Giovanna about the absence of the cab, so that he and Paola could finally be together. The elevator, instead of a means of up-and-down transport for people, is a killing device for advancing one love story over another.

The ascent to upper floors metaphorizes aspirations of upward social and professional mobility. In *Nata di marzo*, Francesca uses the elevator as a place for networking with tenants with higher political and economic statuses, in order to introduce them to her husband Sandro to boost his career. The elevator functions as a locale for social interactions.

When a character is prevented from taking the elevator, the opportunities for professional advancement are denied, as we can attest in *Il posto*. Queuing among many employees, the protagonist, Domenico Cantoni (Sandro Panseri), faces a rejection by the doorman because the elevator has reached its maximum capacity, and is consequently obliged to take the stairs to avoid being late for the job interview. The elevator therefore acts as a mirror of the social hierarchy that reigns in the company, since its access is regulated by the building ushers, who are obsequious and reverent towards the manager, while hostile towards new arrivals. Domenico's inability to take the elevator may therefore be understood as an impediment to securing the much-desired job. The vertical mobility from which Domenico is excluded is linked to the horizontal mobility he is granted when hired as a delivery man. In fact, Domenico's workplace will be the long corridors of the company, in which he runs back and forth to deliver the mail. It follows that vertical mobility, and not horizontal, corresponds with a job of higher compensation and prestige (fig. 14).

We have seen that the elevator is a platform for gaining better social, economic and professional status, but Milanese skyscraper cinema also represented the effect this new technology had on customers. Unlike Savinio's contemplative experience, the elevator in the clinic sequence of *La notte* is a place where Lidia and Giovanni are incapable of relating to each other or to the space around them. This is one of the first scenes of the film, in which the couple goes to visit their terminally-ill friend Tommaso in a modern clinic. Although the exterior building and the entrance is the eight-story building in Via Lanzone 4 (Mario Asnago, Claudio Verner; 1950–1953), the elevator is actually located in the Torre Galfa. In his diary, Antonioni recorded his impressions of shooting this sequence in the Torre Galfa: "The elevators are very fast, you can reach the top floors in the blink of an eye. They tell me that their speed has recently been slowed down because many employees, especially women, felt a bit unwell. Technique is ahead of us: we are not ready yet, we are not physically ready."[45] The calm and pleasant slowness of Savinio's elevator ride is long gone. Antonioni's drastic consideration of technological innovations implies a view of the device as an object that while in vertical motion, can also produce physical discomfort.

The intimacy of the elevator space is experienced in an alienating way by Giovanni and Lidia, who do not exchange words or make eye contact; their stillness casts them as automatons. The sterile spaces of the modern elevator, the cold aluminum walls, the décor's minimalism all mirror the coldness and detachment between them. When they exit the elevator, they encounter a female patient affected with what appears to be a libido disorder. The elevator has brought them to an aseptic floor of the clinic where death and pathological sexual desire are represented by his friend Tommaso and the nymphomaniac, respectively. Thanatos and Eros, the two primal drives at work in each individual, find a common home on this floor. In fact, the patient's chronically augmented libido stands as a perversion of the instinct for life. After the visit to Tommaso, Giovanni accepts the female patient's sexual invitation, plunging into loveless sex as a way to forget his terminally-ill friend. Insomuch as erotic desire is the desire to become one with another, by achieving union lovers lose their individual identities. To fulfill Eros, therefore, is to experience death; in this regard, Eros and Thanatos align.[46] The encounter between Giovanni

14 *Il posto*, Director Ermanno Olmi, Italy 1961, film still (copyright Criterion Collection)

15 *La notte*, Director Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy/France 1961, film still (copyright Criterion Collection)

16 *L'uomo dei cinque palloni*, Direcor Marco Ferreri, Italy/France 1965 (1969 released as the director's cut *Break up*), film still (copyright Champion-Les Films Concordia)

and the nymphomaniac takes place in front of the elevator, making it the means of his escape from the elevated floor that has emotionally shocked him (fig. 15).

In *L'uomo dei cinque palloni*, too, mental disorder can be related to the elevator. Fuggetta is the owner of a toy factory, and his life is oriented around, and almost consumed by the fast rhythms of the production line. The quick pace and repetitive movements of the factory destabilize Fuggetta's precarious mental health. The up-tempo soundtrack and montage of the factory machinery in the opening titles embody Fuggetta's anxiety. The rotative machinery finds an echo in the continuous, circular movement of the cars in the vertical automated parking garage where Fuggetta parks his vehicle. The building, constructed due to the pressing need for city parking space, was installed in the central street of Via Torino. It was one of the few vertical parking garages in Italy at the time, and a sign of the modern technological advances imported from the U.S. at the end of the 1950s. When exiting the building, Fuggetta is disturbed by the architecture and automatized repetitive motion of the vertical garage. Since the only function of the building was to move cars up and down, the elevator shaped the design of the building itself (fig. 16).

The elevator can also be a site from which to behold the city from an elevated position. For this to happen, the walls have to come down or become transparent. Milanese skyscraper cinema featured two exposed-core elevators: the glass-window elevator incased in the frame of steel pipes at the Torre del Parco in *Nata di Marzo* and the façade cleaning elevator of the Torre Pirelli in *La notte*. In both cases, the elevators offered the characters and audience the opportunity to view the city from an elevated, movable position, a metaphor of modernity.

In *Nata di Marzo*, the exposed core of the Torre del Parco serves to exhibit both Sandro's architectural knowledge and the city view. Ponti's Torre del Parco is designed as a hexagonal prism built of innovative steel pipes (Dalmine) welded and bolted together. Inside its open structure, a smaller tower hosts the elevator core and a spiral staircase that winds around it.[47] The staging of the elevator ride features a cab with glass walls to which is applied a rear projection that showed the cityscape interspersed with the tower's reticular frame. Sandro, an architect devotee of the Organicist school of Frank Lloyd Wright, takes Francesca on a date to the restaurant at the top of the Torre del Parco. The elevator ride gives Francesca the chance to test Sandro's knowledge of architecture. She asks him if he is able to replicate a construction similar to the Torre del Parco, or more audaciously, a crooked building like the Tower of Pisa. Sandro's architectural expertise is the filter through which Francesca and the viewers experience the city (fig. 17).

45 "Gli ascensori sono velocissimi, si arriva agli ultimi piani in un batter d'occhio. Mi dicono che la loro velocità è stata recentemente attenuata perché molti impiegati, specialmente donne, accusavano un certo malessere. La tecnica ci precede: non siamo ancora pronti, non lo siamo fisicamente." Archivio Fotografico delle Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Ferrara, Ferrara, Fondo Michelangelo Antonioni, B. 8/D3, c. 227, Michelangelo Antonioni, "Ri-evocazione sulla lavorazione de 'La notte', con riflessione sul rapporto tra tecnologia ed esseri umani," 1960–1962.

46 It is worth remembering that the French refer to orgasm – literally the moment when erotic desire is fulfilled – as *la petite mort*, a term that conveys precisely the convergence between Eros and Thanatos.

47 Licitra Ponti/Ponti 1990, p. 61; Pelizzari 2011, p. 148.

Furthermore, thanks to the rear projection of the city view interspersed by the tower's structure, the internal elevator shows not only the city but the skeleton of the building, with its structural components. The Tower's light structure and the elevator's exposed core and glass walls are elements that allow Sandro and Francesca to view the city below. Thanks to the vertical movement of the elevator, the skyscraper and the city come together in a single image. In fact, the speed of the elevator dissolves the components of the Tower in a fast sequence of shadow beams, transforming the pipes into moving shadows that are superimposed on the image of the city. The elevator ride matches the new verticality of the city, demonstrating how the elevator itself was an agent of modernity since it enabled vertical constructions (fig. 18).

The top of the tower where the bar was located takes the appearance of a smiling face with the arrangement of the curtains forming two eyes with black pupils and a long and thin mouth in the lower part. The anthropomorphization of the upper part of the tower imparts lightness to the scene, which features one of the couple's first dates, rendering the skyscraper participatory in their romance. Along with its giving access to the city view, the skyscraper becomes a moving sculpture, a spectacle for those below it and those riding in the elevator. The exposed elevator's core furnishes the opportunity to watch and be watched, as attested in the establishing shot of the elevator rising to the top of the tower (fig. 19).

The act of displaying the city through the elevator acquires an even further layer of complexity – the layer of the façade itself – in the opening title sequence of *La notte*. The sequence is composed of four shots: two wide shots from the Torre Pirelli's roof and two tracking shots descending along its façade. The first two shots provide an aerial view of Milan, while the tracking shots offer a mediated image of the city reflected in its windows. The second long shot is divided in two – on the left side is the city while on the right side is the façade that reflects the city (fig. 20–21).

The two tracking shots on the façade were taken from the elevator used for cleaning the façade itself. One version of the screenplay now in Antonioni's archive envisaged the presence of cleaners: "Along one wall of the Pirelli skyscraper, the men in charge of cleaning the windows are at work. The walkway they are on is very high up, close to the top of the building." [48] The decision to remove the elevator and workers from the frame augmented the visual intensity of the façade's reflective surface. While an establishing sequence of a city is a very common way to start a film, what is unusual is the use of a façade as a surface upon which to reflect the surrounding city. The elevator becomes one with the camera, showing the skyscraper's skin, which in turn reveals the city below. By introducing Milan as a reflection on the Torre Pirelli, *La notte* equally places the two at the heart of the opening sequence.[49] *La notte* employs the Torre

17 *Nata di marzo*, Director Antonio Pietrangeli, Italy 1958, film still (copyright Euro International Films)

18 *Nata di marzo*, Director Antonio Pietrangeli, Italy 1958, film still (copyright Euro International Films)

19 *Nata di marzo*, Director Antonio Pietrangeli, Italy 1958, film still (copyright Euro International Films)

48 "Lungo una parete del grattacielo della Pirelli gli uomini addetti alla pulizia dei vetri stanno facendo il lavoro. La passerella sulla quale sono, è altissima, quasi vicino alla cima dell'edificio." Archivio Fotografico delle Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Ferrara, Ferrara, Fondo Michelangelo Antonioni, B. 8A/14 fasc. 26, Michelangelo Antonioni, "La notte. Sceneggiatura completa [1959–1960]," 1959–1960.

20 *La notte*, Director Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy/France 1961, film still (copyright Criterion Collection)

21 *La notte*, Director Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy/France 1961, film still (copyright Criterion Collection)

Pirelli both as a mirror, to present Milan, and as a symbol, to introduce Milan as the quintessential modern city. In fact, the Torre Pirelli is both the emblem of the power of the industrial bourgeoisie and an important example of modern architecture (fig. 22).

Conclusion

In 1961, artist and architect Vittoriano Viganò paid homage to his father Vito's unrealized project *Campanile a Piazza Duomo* (1927) by erecting *Verticale in Piazza Duomo* (1961–1962), a temporary structure made of scaffolding pipes situated at the side of the Duomo. The temporary monument was part of *Parata Luci* (Light Parade), a Christmas celebration in the streets of the center curated by the artist Bruno Munari. The *Verticale* had a square footprint of 10x10 meters, gradually shrinking towards the top.[50] Viganò collaborated on this project with Milanese-based Gruppo T, who arranged over the entire structure several lights and speakers, in addition to white, orange, and red panels. The work is the testimony of a period in which the fervor of vertical construction defined Milanese sensibility. Viganò gave the city an ephemeral work that recalled the temporary structures of the sets in film studios, but in this case in the open air and in the real context of an urban center. The features of *Verticale* also touch on some of the aspects we have dealt with in this study. In addition to the height, the transparency provided by the scaffolding pipes elicited the transparency of the curtain wall facades of the skyscrapers. The illuminated structure decorated with colored panels moved about by the wind recalled the facades of buildings covered by intermittent neon lights that gave movement to these urban scenes. *Verticale*'s location next to the Duomo evoked the discourse on the relationship of tall buildings with the historical fabric of the city, and therefore between the verticality of the skyscrapers and the horizontality of the low houses of historic Milan.

The aim of this essay has been to present a new object of study in Italian cinema – the skyscraper – as an entry point into the lively discussion on the modernization of Italian society during the economic miracle. I have proposed a methodological framework for a critical examination of this building type by focusing on three elements of the cinematic representation. The lighting of office spaces and advertisements created a new landscape that elicited sensations of displacement derived from the international aesthetics of these new forms of the technologization of façades. The air of Milan, characterized in popular culture as polluted and foggy, received a *cleaning treatment* by the skyscrapers and became pristine and transparent. The skyscraper air turned out to be so regulated that human beings felt detached from their surroundings and alienated in the very built environment that they had produced. The elevator, a technology created to connect distinct points along a vertical axis, was reconceptualized as a place of social affirmation based on the flawed values of Western consumer society, which Milan embodied.

49 Antonioni's representation of the Torre Pirelli anticipates a much darker treatment of the skyscraper in Carlo Lizzani's *La vita agra* (1964), an adaptation of the Luciano Bianciardi novel with the same title, published in 1962.

50 Stocchi 1999, p. 84.

Thus, we should read Milanese skyscraper cinema as a phenomenon that draws upon this new building type in order to articulate a discourse of the disrupting effects of modernization on the inhabitants of Milan. The study has revealed Milan as a city in incessant transition, molded by the persistence of the previous urban fabric of forms and the dramatic introduction into that fabric of vertical structures, in an unceasing process of destruction and reconstruction. Italian cinema documented this weaving process beginning in the mid- to late 1950s with light comedies that depict skyscrapers as a means of social climbing, very often from a female perspective, as in *Nata di Marzo* and *Ragazze d'oggi*. Skyscrapers were seen as an opportunity for a new and prosperous future, in a penthouse or luxury apartment, satisfying changing economic needs dictated by the impending economic miracle. A few years later, in the early 1960s, with films such as *La notte* and *Milano nera*, the promises of a bright future have already been compromised by a crisis affecting social relations, revealing how the sociocultural environments of skyscrapers actively produced sensations of alienation in the population. The latest productions of this cinematic cycle – *La vita agra*, *L'uomo dei cinque palloni* – register skyscrapers as prompters of emotional and mental deterioration, both in working and domestic spaces, and therefore as a toxic feature of urban development both for the psyches and bodies of the inhabitants. Whether images of elevators, lighting or of air itself, there is an insistence in these films that the vertical is linked to a disruption in the status quo. In these cinematic productions, the skyscraper has evolved into an architecture of excess, transforming the ways in which bodies live in a rapidly changing urban space, in constant negotiation with their social, cultural, and political positions.

22 Anonymous, Monica Vitti and the director Antonioni in the external window cleaning lift of the Centro Pirelli in Milan during the filming of "La notte", from: Fabio Carpi, "Il film letterario", *Pirelli. Rivista d'Informazione e Tecnica*, 2 (1961), pp. 45–49, p. 48

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