

# Film on postwar Italian life falls short

## The Way We Laughed, directed by Gianni Amelio

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*The Way We Laughed*, directed by Gianni Amelio, written by Amelio, Daniele Gaglianone, Lillo Iacolino and Alberto Taraglio

*The Way We Laughed* (*Così ridevano*) is the latest film of Gianni Amelio, the Italian director who gained an international reputation for *The Stolen Children* and *Lamerica* in the early 1990s. Amelio is a serious filmmaker. He insists on examining history and the lives of ordinary people, an approach which, especially in the US, is definitely not in fashion today. *The Way We Laughed*, labeled “slow” by some critics, had to wait for three years for US distribution, even though it won the top prize at the 1998 Venice Film Festival. It is certainly worth seeing, though not nearly as effective as Amelio’s earlier work.

The plot revolves around the relations of two brothers, Giovanni (Enrico Lo Verso) and Pietro (Francesco Giuffrida), who migrate from Sicily to Turin, in the industrial north of the country, in the late 1950s. Amelio uses a somewhat unusual method. The film is divided schematically into six discrete “chapters,” separate days between the years of 1958 and 1964. Each segment—“Arrivals,” “Deceptions,” “Money,” “Letters,” “Blood” and “Families”—is announced on screen with its accompanying date.

In confining himself to only six days in the six-year period, the filmmaker obviously leaves many things unstated. Major changes that have taken place in the lives of the two brothers in the course of the previous eight, twelve or fifteen months are not shown. Some of the changes only gradually emerge as the narrative proceeds, and many questions remain unanswered.

Giovanni, the older brother, arrives from Sicily to visit Pietro, who has proceeded him to the north. The family has invested its hopes in the younger son, who is studying to become a teacher. Giovanni decides to

remain in Turin to give his brother moral and financial support.

Complications are almost immediately apparent. The first meeting of the brothers, when Giovanni arrives at the Turin rail station, sets the tone for some of what follows. Pietro avoids his brother. He hides briefly around a pillar to avoid being seen, and then busies himself giving directions to a Sicilian family that has just disembarked on the same train. The two brothers give very different impressions: Giovanni is naïve and warm-hearted; Pietro is secretive and moody, and is apparently trying to leave his impoverished southern roots behind him. He ends up contemptuously dismissing the Sicilian family who has asked him for aid.

In the subsequent chapters, we witness something of a reversal of roles. It turns out that Pietro is squandering the money given him by his brother, skipping his classes and preparing to be thrown out of school. Giovanni, on the other hand, makes some progress within the Sicilian immigrant community, ending up a few rungs up the ladder from newer arrivals. While little is shown of these changes, Giovanni secures a job as a low-level boss for casual labor.

This sets the stage, in turn, for the tragic denouement. Giovanni kills someone in a fight. Pietro, who witnesses the incident, takes the rap for his brother, although we are never shown how or why this takes place. Giovanni marries a woman from the north, while Pietro is sent to reformatory and then to prison.

Amelio is presenting a parable of postwar Italy. He wants to portray what he considers the “dark side” of the process of industrialization and urbanization—the racism directed against the southerners, the exploitation and poverty that capitalism, even in its boom periods,

cannot live without.

This is an important theme, but there are huge weaknesses in the way the film deals with it. Amelio has, it seems intentionally, told his audience very little about the protagonists of the film. The two brothers are alienated from one another. They seem to know little about each other, but the viewers know little about either.

The filmmaker chooses to show the estrangement in the most general terms. These characters say very little. They remain something of a mystery. It is never clear why Pietro decides to sacrifice himself for his brother, why Giovanni accepts this, or how and why Giovanni gets involved in the shady milieu that leads to the killing in the first place.

All of this raises questions on the social and political history of the period, questions which are almost totally ignored. Typical of Amelio's vagueness is the way he depicts, for a brief moment, a strike struggle in Turin. A mass of workers is shown marching with red flags from the CGT, the Communist Party trade union. Giovanni sees them, but does not join. Nothing is said. The implication is that the brothers choose to remain uninvolved, or that the unions are unable to reach them, or that the workers movement is itself an anachronism. But this is touched on so fleetingly and ambiguously that little can be drawn from it.

This is a big subject, and it would be formal and foolish to expect the film to deal with it in some kind of finished fashion. It is not that a worked-out political analysis must necessarily be presented, but that a serious look at this period has to at least show what was going on politically and socially.

The vagueness here is perhaps connected to Amelio's own outlook. He has been quoted as follows on the theme of the film: "Now we are rich—and arrogant—without any memory of our past, of illness and poverty. How much have we paid to achieve our affluence? Is it possible that in searching for material comfort we have lost something—humanity, bravery, civic valor?"

Who is rich and who is arrogant? Amelio appears to be referring to Italy as a whole. Perhaps he is speaking of the trade union leadership, and the ex-Stalinists of the Party of the Democratic Left, but he makes no distinction between these leaders and the workers they betrayed and abandoned.

Moreover, the filmmaker suggests that the changes in the economy inevitably bring the losses to which he refers. This is the refrain of many disillusioned radicals who, rather than drawing any lessons from the role of Stalinism and reformism in the twentieth century, end up blaming the working class and suggesting that a return to the past is needed.

In *Lamerica* (1994), set in Albania and Italy in the years immediately following the collapse of the East European Stalinist regimes, Amelio is far more concrete, and the hard-hitting depiction of the shallowness of the Italian boom hits home. Lo Verso has the leading role in the earlier film as well, playing an Italian hustler in Albania. He also goes through a "loss of innocence," learning some bitter lessons as the scam he tries to carry out in Albania blows up in his face. The character is far more believable and far more clearly depicted, and the earlier movie packs a punch that *The Way We Laughed* is missing.



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