*Please Note: This was an oral presentation not meant for publication. DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION. Due to time constraints, the original paper was cut to cover only Ruttmann’s film. NO REFERENCE TO GERMAN FILMS of the PERIOD is made in this paper. Other papers in the panel at the MLA 2014 covered German Theatre and Italian Films (contemporary)

Pirandello’s Character in Ruttmann’s Cacophonous Film Acciaio (1933)

Today I can only offer some cursory comments on Walter Ruttmann’s 1933 film Acciaio. ACCIAIO was based on a story written for the screen by Pirandello. In key regards the production of the film was a failure: Francesco Callari and Claudio Camerini detail how the making of Acciaio was mired in tensions and disagreements among Pirandello, Ruttmann and the composer Malipiero. My central argument, though, is that the film nevertheless – unwittingly and ironically -- encapsulates Pirandello’s conflicted positions about the cinema. The failings help to produce “success” – insofar as success is gauged by exhibiting Pirandello’s positions. Indeed, Acciaio exhibits both Pirandello’s sense that cinema, as a new technology of reproduction, had creative experimental potential. However, he saw the same technology, and industry, as potentially alienating and commodifying.

As corollary to this central argument, I would go further to suggest that the failed collaboration among Acciaio’s diverse “authors”– which, as we shall see, this idiosyncratic film uniquely embodies – is symptomatic of Pirandello’s anxieties about the cultural and intellectual role writers, including he himself, would play in a world increasingly dominated by the “culture industry”. Indeed the anxieties may have contributed to the failure, anxieties and ambiguities Pirandello had already expressed in his 1915 novel on the cinema, called “Shoot.” The original story that he penned for Acciaio included some experimentation
with visual and auditory aspects ... BUT these are secondary to presenting the characters and their milieu.

Pirandello admired the German directors of Expressionism and, especially, New Objectivity, praising the ways their experimental techniques brought the existential and social dilemmas of modern subjectivity to the fore. However he found it hard to accept Ruttmann’s modernist cinematography. For Pirandello the experimentation had gone too far, with images overpowering dialogue. Ruttmann’s shots of the machines in the steel industry, which serve as the stage where the human story unfolds, were, for Pirandello, both unrelenting and aestheticized, and thus visually overwhelming, with the consequence that the relationships between characters, he claimed, were diminished. Pirandello’s original story, which he had titled “Play, Pietro!, ( “Gioca, Pietro”) was an attempt to capture the existential and social contradictions affecting the working classes, especially those of agrarian and provincial communities caught in the transition to becoming urban, de-personalized, industrialized centers. He felt that Ruttmann’s shots of machinery were untouched by human presence and unrelated to the feelings and minds of the characters. Pirandello fears that he, as author and Maestro, has little control over the final film, the form and meaning that grew out OF experimentation. For these experiments are, ultimately, in cinema, as this film demonstrates for him, more the purview of A Technician Of The Image than of A Master Of Words. Pirandello’s ambivalence towards the cinema intersects with the story of Acciaio’s failed collaboration – an intersection also visible in the film itself, which the general public received as an incongruent, non-organic work.
In spite of Pirandello’s objections and resistance, it is my view that Acciaio fulfills two of his desiderata. First, it captures his ideas about an experimental yet epic cinema. It does this through its skilled montage and soundtrack, which, in turn, succeed in welding together a documentary style and an ante-litteram neo-realistic cinematography. Some of Pirandello’s instructions for the screen were ignored, and the dialogue radically shortened. Nevertheless, in welding together the documentary and the neo-realistic – without organically fusing them – a distinctive cinematic language of polytonality unwittingly emerges, which is both experimental and epic, and which resonates with Pirandello’s ideas about sound-cinema.

Second, and perhaps more important, this cinematic language does not glorify work, as demanded by Mussolini who commissioned the film. Instead it problematizes industrial forms of production. At the level of content, it underscores the strenuous working conditions in the factory, which show the danger and risk run by the workers on a daily basis; at the filmic meta-level, that is, self-referentially, Acciaio exhibits the alienating nature of industrial cinema production. Indeed, one can identify the self-referential quality of the film — the film within film that Pirandello had always wished to make and never did — at different points in Acciaio. One sees — and hears — self-referentiality in the film’s presentations of machines, and technology more in general. Here, I point, in brief, to two such instances.

In one scene we see and hear a gramophone. It invokes popular culture, in general, but, more specifically, Camerini’s 1932 successful commercial film Gli uomini che mascalzoni! (“What scoundrels men are!”), from which Acciaio distances itself (Vito Zagarro). The gramophone plays “Parlami d’amore Mariu”
(Speak to Me of Love, Mariu), the lead-song in Camerini’s highly popular film. In Acciaio, the protagonist, lovesick, disheartened and angry, enters the bar where the song is playing, and stops it. This is the only (diegetic) found-music, so to speak, in the film, which is mostly dominated by diegetic sounds and noises, i.e., the beats and shrieks of the machines, and a non-diegetic score composed by Malipiero. The seeming authenticity of the song however is undermined by the fact that it is a MEDIATISED reproduction, a recording being played on a gramophone. Furthermore, in Acciaio it functions as a note of contrast: it is a ‘quote’ of a song played in another, this time visual recording, namely Camerini’s film. As film What scoundrels men are! conceals its fictitious reality behind the illusions produced by a naturalistic style – which both Pirandello and Ruttmann deemed inadequate for film in general, and especially for sound film.

Second -- and I am still speaking of self-referentiality here -- when heavy machinery figures in the factory sequences, cinema itself is indexed through the film’s insistence on the ‘gaze’. It is in these scenes of machinery that the gaze is referenced. For example, we see a group of tourists on a visit to the steel factory that, Ruttmann’s montage implies, not only sees the great feats of Italian industry, but – importantly -- a work-place accident. The relations among workers in the factory are also shown through subjective shots of workers looking at other workers – and, on two occasions, witnessing fatal accidents. Thus the machines demand the sacrifice of the “life” of their “operators,” the workers who figure here not unlike the actors in front of the camera in Pirandello’s novel Shoot!. Accordingly, the workers-actors in Acciaio are also reduced to reified and alienated images of themselves, soon to be consumed and through whose consumption the spectacle of modernity is generated. On my interpretation, the
dangers Pirandello saw in cinema and that he described in *Shoot!,* dangers that Walter Benjamin also saw in the 1930s when he drafted “The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility”, translate visually into the spectacle of fatal industrial alienation. In *Shoot* Pirandello describes the camera as a black, 3-legged spider, devouring all humanity from humans. In *Acciaio,* the monster morphs into gigantic limbs of incandescent steel ready to kill the workers. But the camera renders itself visible, rather than concealing itself behind the spectacle. It does this mainly, and importantly, through the shots of workers looking at each other, mentioned above.

The film is perhaps conservative, for it ends with a message about fulfilling duty and, broadly, of work as *magister vitae.* In the end, the main protagonist understands that his free spirit will grant him more joy and less suffering if it is channeled into useful and regulated work. He willingly resumes his duty as a factory worker – thus fulfilling his destiny – instead of following his impulsive desire to leave town and become a professional cyclist.\(^1\)

I suggest, however, that the film’s self-referentiality also shows signs of playful resistance.\(^2\) The film’s ending seems to sacrifice “play” in the name of “steel” duty. But “play” still does impose itself, particularly through the presence of children. (Here we should recall that Pirandello’s original title was “Play, Pietro!”) Running freely, watching the adults, and interfering with them, the children’s gaze on the-world-of-adults anticipates that of the children in neorealist cinema. It also helps to question the teleological and linear narrative that, in the film, overtly links play and work, pleasure and duty, childhood and maturity.
In one scene, children are shown playing with a miniature industrial hammer. But the toy’s hammering is out of synch with the that of the machine in the factory, the loud repetitive pounding of which dominates the town, and the film. The scene concludes with the protagonist teaching the children how to use the “hammer” properly, which leaves the childrens’ toy and and the adults’ machine synchronized, so that the scene fluidly switches from the children at play, to the toy, to the machine in the factory.

Ruttman attempts to integrate the unruly neo-realist elements through his montage of noise and image, and the rhythmic sequences of factory work. Still, the dissonant styles of cinematography -- neorealist with children, documentary-style with factory machines-- bracket the scenes of play. The latter remain an asynchronous and non-organic intrusion, a resistant supplement. Not only as playful actors — only one actor in the film is a professional — but also as spectators of the sad human affairs of modern life, these children propose a kind of active and interruptive attention to life — including life on the screen — that does not conform to the film’s conservative narratives: of sacrifice, duty, and humane management.

At the same time, Acciaio’s overt conversion-story from play to duty, from youth to maturity, could also be interpreted as unintentionally analogous to the fate of Pirandello’s original story, as it is subjected to the requirements of cinema, albeit art cinema. In turn Pirandello’s own story may illustrate the painful call to duty — duty, rather than experimentation and play (?) — which led to Pirandello submitting this story for this commissioned film. Nino Borsellino suggests that this painful accommodation is detrimental to the story that thus falls short of Pirandello’s name and work. In so doing Gioca Pietro! would betray the playful
irony and experimentation of *Shoot!* My view differs from Borsellino’s. I find that Ruttmann’s *Acciaio* succeeds in bringing out, albeit paradoxically and ironically, Pirandello’s mixed feelings about the cinema. It does so through its self-referential quality, its heterogenous, and contrasting, i.e. polytonal cinematic registers, as well as, through the presentation of play. Thus, *Acciaio* captures both Pirandello’s concerns about the cinema AND his vision of it as an innovative medium with the potential to change the ways artistic practice will consider the fine line separating reality and fiction, essence and appearance.

The sense of experimentation that for some critics derived to the film from the incomplete and non-organic “*melo*” less of dramatic elements than of different registers of “reality capture,” so to speak, was interpreted by the same critics as a flaw, and at times was attributed to Ruttmann’s self-indulgence. In fact, I suggest, it allows the film to carry out three main things. First, it attempts an audacious anti-spectacular cinematography that recuperates the ironic moments in Pirandello’s story, even those about the story’s own subjection to duty per Borsellino above, and especially Pirandello’s ambivalences about the cinema. Second, the film interpolates its conservative “message” with the supplement of scenes of “play” that resist it. Third, the film shows the challenges faced by the working classes in fascist Italy. Thereby *Acciaio* resists –albeit subtly—the intentions the regime had expressed by commissioning it.

In lieu of a proper conclusion, let me just add a final comment to the above, that situates Pirandello-Ruttmann’s controversial collaborative effort within the larger issue of media authorial claims. Indeed, I would argue that, if as noted above the heterogeneous political and poetic agendas that motivated and
informed Acciaio — CINES’s, Pirandello’s, the regime’s, the composer’s, and Ruttmann’s himself — are not fully reconciled in the film; this failure to ‘reconcile’ that in fact generates a masterful, cacophonic product — a UNICUM at this point and time — also importantly exhibits the limitations and problems that both producers (writers, directors, etc) and consumers (critics, public etc.) of culture had started to experience when trying to uphold the label of authorial identity (i.e., the name of THE author, as it were) in the field of modern “multi-media” productions. And that this was a seminal issue concerning cultural production at large is shown, amongst others, by Walter Benjamin poignant 1934 text “The Author as Producer”, besides the more quoted “The Work of Art.”

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1 Interesting role of bikes, the bikes of the workers, all aligned and hanging in rows in the factory, or depicted as means of transport versus the fast bikes of the cyclists at the beginning of the film and during the Giro d'Italia.

ii For its conservative message of reconciliation between industry and workers – which is most evident in the story of Pietro’s father in the film (Giovanni’s in the story)—the film could be compared with Fritz Lang’s Metropolis. However, as I would argue, the discordant and non-organic images of “modernity” that emerge from the different stylistic registers in Ruttmann’s cinematography block such reconciliation, which –by the way— is glorified only to be subtly critiqued in Pirandello’s story. The latter in fact is closer to the story of Murnau’s film The Last Laugh, without however the ironic and self-reflexive reference to the fictional world of the movies.

iii With the exception of Isa Pola, no actors took part in the film.

iv With perhaps subconscious processes of myse-en-abyrne,