

The Tree of Wooden Clogs

Italy 1978
Directed by Ermanno Olmi

Ermanno Olmi is a director who has raised the moral bar for contemporary Italian cinema. The sacredness of life, the dignity of work, and the human yearning for contact with God are themes that deeply colour his work, but nowhere so movingly as in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, which has a vibrant realism that makes the audience feel that they are shoulder to shoulder with its protagonists, the dirt-poor northern Italian share-croppers whose deep, abiding faith is extraordinarily moving.

Written and directed with inspired simplicity, the story of four peasant-families who live and work on one tenant farm in late 19th-century Lombardy offers almost documentary glimpses into a long-gone way of life. With their rough, ruddy faces, the farmers have a look of callus-handed realism that we recognise out of period paintings. No nostalgia here: there is joy and beauty in their lives, and even some homey humour, but above all there is bitter poverty and exploitation. The peasants, whom we get to know intimately over the course of three hours, labour for a landlord who owns the fields they till, the dwellings where they raise their families, their stables and horses and even the trees lining the road.

Born in the Lombard province of Bergamo to a working-class family with deep Catholic roots, Olmi has almost always made work that is grounded in a strong sense of the place he comes from. He understood the importance of this project, spending years writing and developing it, and insisted on the use of the authentic regional accent of the Bergamasque, which requires subtitles even for Italians.

Although Olmi's films shine with the light of his strong Christian faith, they are never sectarian. He never excludes the non-religious viewer from their luminous story-telling and fable-like powers of fascination. He has set out on a life-long quest to find a deeper truth in humble everyday characters and settings, a search strongly influenced by the humanist work of the neorealist masters of the 1940s, Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio de Sica.

Deborah Young, Criterion

At close to three hours, Olmi's dark, slow and mysterious masterpiece needs some acclimatisation-time; it needs an investment of audience-attention, so that the emotional connection can be made. For the first act, it is a little opaque and forbidding, but the fairground-scene in the middle unlocks the film's energy, and the final sequences are powerful in ways that could not be possible had we not been immersed in the sombre day-lit world, with every shot composed with painterly care. There is something almost biblical in the starkness and sadness of the situation we see. The drama is set among the tough lives of Lombardy peasants of the late 19th century and Olmi uses non-professionals to play the roles. The costumes, the language and locations are so utterly convincing and of time, it is as if the film had somehow been made in 1898. The film has a tempo as slow as the seasons' turns, but there is something magnificent in its utter commitment and authenticity.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*

Wooden Clogs addresses politics through the tangible and visibly evident details of its characters' lives. Neither strictly conservative in its clear fondness for the cultural specifics on display, nor outwardly irate over the constraints the peasants are made to live with, the film asks to be taken at face value but with the recognition that invisible forces, whether societal or religious, are inevitably at play in any point of human contact. For these characters, and seemingly Olmi himself, Christianity matters more than Marxism, if only because the strict belief of immediate contact with an inexplicable God may be used to assuage the pain of the present.

Clayton Dillard, *Slant*

The neorealist resolve 'to plant the camera in the midst of real life, in the midst of all that struck our astonished eyes' (Vittorio de Sica) enabled the film-makers and their audiences to see an Italy that Mussolini had concealed for two full decades. Neorealism became an 'instrument leading to knowledge about reality and a means towards liberation and freedom' (Elio Petri). Neorealism therefore demands an approach that goes far beyond mere considerations of style. In Italy, it is the point of departure for all serious post-war cinematic practice, and each director has to come to terms with it in some way, whether in imitation, commercial exploitation or ostensible rejection. Ermanno Olmi, with his training as a documentarist and his refusal to work in the commercial film-industry, seems to be the silent standard-bearer for the neorealist revival. In his sense of the film-maker's public mission, Olmi demonstrates that he is indeed the moral, as well as the technical, heir of 1940s neorealism. 'Most films subvert culture', he says, 'because they encourage the evasion of responsibility. In my view, society must be made up of responsible men, for those who do not take responsibility for their own lives are ripe to be led by a dictator'.

Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (1986)