

*Please note: The photo-essay simply tells the story of the film in intermediate-level Italian. This is a basic, literal translation to assist Italian learners understand the text. In writing our photo-essays, we aim for a fluid Italian and write a translation to match it. We hope that this language-learning tool will be engaging and enlightening. It's no substitute for material written at a native-language level that explores the film in depth!*

*The images are an important part of the photo-essay. Each paragraph refers to specific images. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog, so that you can have context for the words. These visuals also help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the links to other references in the blog itself.*

*Thank you, and enjoy!*

## **“I fidanzati” Part I**

Ermanno Olmi, Director (1962)

### **What are we talking about?**

In Milan, Giovanni and Liliana have been sweethearts for many years. Giovanni is offered a better job in Sicily, and he accepts, against Liliana's wishes. Can Giovanni realize his dreams? Will the separation end their relationship? Or will it bring them closer than ever?

### **Getting to know them better**

Milan in the 1960s. Our story begins at night. We observe people filing into a brightly lit building. They are silent; no music offers a clue about where they are going or what they are about to do or what the mood is. But it seems that whatever is about to happen will be significant and perhaps sad.

Everyone is heading to a big room, where some people are already seated. The opening titles appear over this sequence.

Men and women seat themselves quietly around small, round tables scattered around the perimeter of the room. They don't speak. They sit and wait.

A man enters carrying a box. Another sprinkles sand on the floor. Two other men come in and go up to the piano. One takes off the cover; the other unpacks an accordion. The men and women in the room sit quietly and wait. All is quiet ...

As one of the two men puts on his accordion, the other begins to play the piano. The dance floor is empty.

Without speaking, two ladies get up and begin to dance to the slow, lilting music. Gradually, other couples stand and move slowly, with dignity, to the gentle cadence of the music. Seated at small tables around the periphery of the dance floor, others observe and converse quietly.

A new couple enters. They move purposefully, without speaking, head for one of the tables. The man takes off his jacket and scarf and lays them over a chair.

They are Liliana and Giovanni. They sit, not speaking. Liliana still has her overcoat on.

Just as the other men have done, Giovanni stands up and looks at his companion, wordlessly inviting her to dance. She looks up, but doesn't move. "Well?" he says. She still doesn't answer or budge.

Then, he sits back down. She has her hands over her pocketbook on her lap, looking sad or maybe just vacant.

The next scene opens with a flash of light. Giovanni is looking down, concentrating. When another worker whistles to him, the two communicate through gestures. We see that they're in a factory.

Summoned by the boss, Giovanni climbs a ladder to leave his work space, the music from the dance hall still in the background. In the next shot, we see a more general view of the plant. Giovanni climbs out of a hatch.

We follow him as he walks through the plant. It is spacious: the equipment is laid out in geometric shapes, and light floods in through grilled windows, with the intermittent flashes of blow torches. It's beautiful.

As he approaches the window to an office, Giovanni takes off his cap and safety goggles, that he had on his head. Through the glass, we see two men in suits and ties. Behind them are rows of time cards. One of the men takes off his glasses when he sees Giovanni approaching.

The music continues to play and we are back at the dance hall. Liliana still has a vacant expression. She closes her eyes.

Finally she seems to summon some energy. She calls out to the waiter by name – “Carletto!” – and asks him for a glass of water, which he brings immediately.

Giovanni gets up then, walks across the dance floor and invites someone else to dance.

A man in a light colored jacket approaches Liliana, who is still wearing her coat. He invites her to dance. She barely looks at him.

“No, I don’t feel like it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t feel like it,” she says dismissively.

“You’re different tonight.”

Now we see Liliana in another time and place.

Giovanni tells her, “Look, if I don’t go there, there are ten others ready.”

He continues, “You get such strange ideas.”

And then suddenly, we are back at the dance hall. The camera tracks him and the other woman. They turn around and around on the dance floor to the same tune, which has yet to end.

And then we are back to the plant again. Giovanni stands in the office while a man tells him, “About a year and a half in Sicily.”

The man with glasses adds, “We have to build a new department and we need specialized workers.”

The first man says, “Sorry sir, but at the moment, he’s not specialized.”

The boss replies, “We’ll promote him.”

The couple is alone again. Giovanni says, “For once, a poor guy like me gets the chance to get ahead and all she can do is whine.”

Back at the dance hall, we see that Lilian has not moved, her hands still over her pocketbook on her lap. Seated now, the man who invited her to dance is smoking a cigarette. They watch the couples twirl by.

At last, the song comes to an end. But Giovanni lingers on the dance floor, talking to the other woman. Liliana gazes over at them.

Giovanni looks back at Liliana. She makes a decision.

She puts her pocketbook on the table, takes off her coat and tells the man sitting with her, “Come on. Let’s dance.”

Giovanni returns to an empty table. He sits down, takes out a cigarette and lights it, watching the dancers.

Back at the office, the boss asks Giovanni, “Are you married?”

“No.”

“It’s better that way. Fewer complications. You know how it is with transfers,” he laughs.

We see a quick shot of Giovanni at home. His father is seated at the table.

An employee of the rest home wearing a cap asks, “How old is he?”

“He’s exactly seventy.”

“They’re treated well. They can’t complain,” the man comments.

We see old men at a nursing home, as the man continues, “The only problem is sadness. They feel abandoned ...”

“... and if they don’t get used to it, after a while, they die of sadness.”

“Is he a relative?”

“No, he’s ...” Giovanni doesn’t want to admit that he would abandon his father.

But the man guesses, “Your dad?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you have no other choice, I guess you’ll have to accept it.”

Back at the dance hall, Giovanni and Liliana are dancing together. They spin around. Each time Liliana’s face comes back into view, she looks more upset. She seems about to cry.

“What is it?” asks Giovanni. But Liliana just looks down, her hand on his shoulder in dance position. She says nothing.

A plane takes off; the music is still playing in the background, accompanying every aspect of the lives of our players.

The plane lands and we see Giovanni peering out the window as he goes to exit the plane. He looks around excitedly as he disembarks. It is reminiscent of Malik in *A Prophet*, who is as giddy as a little boy when he takes the plane into Paris. Giovanni is with his boss, Mr. Tommasini, who walks ahead, with confidence. Getting off an airplane is something that he no doubt has done many times.

At the airport, a crowd is waiting. Some of the new arrivals are greeted with hugs and kisses. But Giovanni and his boss walk on silently.

They enter the terminal, where a man in a suit asks, “Are you Tommasini, the engineer?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Good evening, I’m Mr. Lo Giudice. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Mr. Malpiani is sorry that he couldn’t come.”

Giovanni stays quiet. He hasn’t been introduced or even acknowledged. He’s an outsider, of no importance.

The three men walk to the car. Giovanni sits in front with the driver. He has not said a word since they disembarked.

He does roll down his window. It’s the second time we have seen him assert himself: the first was when, refused by Liliana, he asked another woman to dance. In response, Liliana danced with another man. This time, the driver, saying, “Excuse me,” leans over and raises the window back up. From outside the car, we see the barely perceptible outline of the glass as it rises.

“Have you been with us long?” the boss asks Mr. Lo Giudice.

“Three or four months.”

“Where did you graduate from?”

“In Rome.”

So Mr. Lo Giudice has just graduated and he hasn’t been working long.

As the two men in the back seats chat, Giovanni and the driver ride in silence. Giovanni notices the surrounding landscape. Alongside the road are ruins, houses and shrubbery. A road sign next to an old house foreshadows what’s to come next.

Suddenly, a horse-drawn wagon pulls into the road and our driver blows his horn. He complains about the local road hazards and then about the cyclist who cut him off that morning.

As the driver complains, “I almost ran into a wall,” we are brought back to Giovanni and his thoughts of Lilitana. To the soundtrack of the driver’s grievances, we watch Giovanni say goodbye to her from his motorcycle. Then a shot of Giovanni getting into a car, as his father watches from the balcony. And finally back to Lilitana, who refuses Giovanni’s kiss goodbye; she simply walks away.

“Look over there. See those lights?” says the boss, gesturing out the window, “Those are our plants.” The offscreen music now is light jazz.

Arriving, the boss says to Mr. Lo Giudice, “Maybe later we can call Moranzi.”

“I don’t think we’ll find him. He does his own thing.” The boss and Giovanni will be on their own. Mr. Lo Giudice leaves them. He lives in town with his family.

The front desk attendant greets the boss warmly. She lets him know that there are no messages for him. He requests a room for Mr. Cabrini – Giovanni – who will be staying only a few days.

The boss sends Giovanni off to get settled. As he heads upstairs, we hear the woman tell the boss that Giovanni can only stay for four days at most; she has a reservation for his room. But the man replies that it shouldn’t be a problem.

Giovanni gets to his room, one of many at the end of a long corridor. He goes in, takes off his coat and looks around: it’s a cold impersonal space.

He goes into the bathroom and sets out his things. He combs his hair, gazing at his reflection in the mirror.

And he heads back downstairs. At the front desk, there is no one to take care of him, so he just leaves his key on the counter.

Giovanni enters a restaurant, finds himself a table and sits. There is only one other occupied table, three men dressed in casual clothes. Giovanni is still wearing his suit and tie.

He waits, then unfolds his napkin, puts it on his lap and waits some more. The waiter eventually comes. Apparently the kitchen is closing. Giovanni can have soup or spaghetti; that's it. It doesn't matter, replies Giovanni. The waiter leaves him to place the order and Giovanni is alone again, his expression is blank.

Another man walks in, greeted by a voice from the kitchen, "Coming in at this hour? You're working too much, sir." It's the cook, who leans out from the kitchen to greet the new customer. Giovanni glances over, but the man has opened his newspaper. It doesn't look like he's going to make a new friend tonight.

The waiter brings the food and a pitcher of water. Then he begins to confide in Giovanni. He seems to sense that they are both outsiders. The waiter tells Giovanni how hard his job is. It's just him and the cook serving 100 people every day, dinner and lunch as well. Then when he gets home, he has to do the same for himself because his wife is not there. She's at the hospital with their baby who is very sick.

Up to this moment, Giovanni has listened without apparent interest, sprinkling parmesan on his food. But when the man mentions his son, Giovanni looks up. It's been two months and they still don't know what's wrong.

"Is he in pain?"

"How can they know?" answers the waiter, "He's only a few months old." At a call from the cook, he walks away, leaving Giovanni to his solitary dinner.

Our new arrival walks into a common room of the hotel, where about ten men are sitting in the dark. We hear jazz, they could be watching a movie or a television show; at least one of them is sleeping.

Giovanni sits, smokes a cigarette and looks around.

A man in a business suit enters and puts his hand on Giovanni's shoulder.

"Good evening," he says. "Don't get up. Mr. Tommasini asked me to tell you that in the morning you're to report to the plant and ask for Bertinotti."

As the man leaves, Giovanni turns and looks after him.

The show ends, everyone gets up and leaves the room, one by one – all except for the sleeping man, no one bothers to waken him. These men are strangers to each other.

At the desk, each guest asks for his key. Some ask for a wake-up call. This seems to be a nightly ritual. Giovanni asks for instructions for getting to the plant the next day and the attendant tells him the bus schedule.

Once in the room, Giovanni gets into his narrow bed, turns off the light and pulls the covers up. But he can't sleep. He hears a sort of humming or banging. It actually seems like the noise of a factory.

At the window, he pulls open the curtain and looking out, replays his conversation with Liliana: "If I don't go there, there are ten others who will. And then they're going to promote me."

Now we see him having a conversation with Liliana. Only it can't really be called a conversation, because he is the only one talking. He looks at her, but she is looking away, into the distance. "What are you afraid of?" he asks. "Do you think I'm just going to disappear?" She looks down and doesn't respond.

At the hotel, Giovanni has stepped out onto his balcony. He gazes out at the dark, empty road, at the neon sign that says *Bar Torino*, at the lights in the distance.

Apparently Giovanni has given up on sleeping. Dressed in suit and tie, he slowly descends the stairs. We hear the quiet click, click, click of his heels against the floor and the never-ending factory noise. He goes to the reception desk to leave his key but, seeing no one there, he holds on to it and heads out.

Outside, he walks to the bar and enters. The place is deserted, there's only a woman at the cash register and a boy behind the counter. Tables and chairs are lined up against the walls. Some are upside down.

Giovanni goes to the cash register.

Making Giovanni's coffee, the barista works briskly. He must perform each step hundreds of times a day. Giovanni looks on impassively. The boy delivers the coffee, briefly looks at Giovanni and then goes on about his business. Not a word has been exchanged.

Giovanni drinks his coffee at the counter. The cashier is smoking and reading something, we don't know what. The barista is busy, busy, busy. Three people in the same space but on three separate orbits.

Abruptly, the door behind the cashier swings open, and the boy dashes out. “Good night!”

It’s morning in Giovanni’s room. A buzzing awakens him. He jumps out of bed and runs to the door. “Who is it?” he asks. Then he opens the door and looks up and down the corridor. All he sees is the maid cleaning the floor. The sound is coming from the phone: it’s his wake-up call.

He goes into the bathroom, looks into the mirror and yawns. His pajamas look new. Did he buy them especially for Sicily?

Looking out of the bathroom window, he sees a strange combination of country and industry.

There is a pretty house with a yard and trees. Old car tires are strewn about on the ground.

Giovanni inspects the new world around him.

The bus comes and Giovanni boards, along with a line of other men, each one in suit and tie.

As the bus drives through town, we see some moments from the journey. A man in a cherry-picker is fixing a light. Boys run in the street. A dog strolls by.

Throughout the long trip, Giovanni is passive and silent, as always. He looks out the window and observes.

The bus arrives and the men file out silently. Giovanni gets off the bus, carrying his briefcase. He asks where to find Mr. Bertinotti and someone directs him to the first floor. We watch this scene through bars that seem to confine the men as they enter the building.

On the first floor, he again asks for Mr. Bertinotti and is told to have a seat. Over a loudspeaker, a female voice makes a series of announcements.

Apparently Mr. Bertinotti is busy. The secretary gives him some documents.

Then, with other men, Giovanni takes a tour through the plant on a bulldozer. He looks around at the enormity of his new surroundings.

They pass by equipment, structures, pipes, and they see the activities that the enterprise requires.

In a supply depot out on the beach, building materials are waiting to be installed. Men work on different levels of the structure in a set design that couldn't have been more beautifully composed.

In a close-up, we see a series of workers: one welds; another by him covers his eyes with his hand, protecting them from the sparks. A man drinks water from a big plastic jug. Another welder is at work with a protective visor. Another wears only protective goggles.

Giovanni has been welding. He removes his welding mask and squints his eyes as the sudden brightness of the sun hits him.

A siren announces that an ambulance is entering the plant.

Once the ambulance stops, workers run toward it from all directions.

We watch from a safe distance as two men rush out of a structure, carrying a third, who has been injured. A doctor runs to meet them. A crowd of workers quickly gathers around the ambulance, talking loudly.

Then the ambulance pulls away and the workers go back to their posts.

It's the Sicilian culture, someone tells Giovanni, "They don't wear their safety masks. They've been working like this for too many years. In the early days, when it rained, they wouldn't come to work." "You're kidding," comments Giovanni.

"Here, when it rains, everything stops. They don't have an industrial mentality and there's nothing you can do."

Giovanni suggests, "Maybe with the new generations ..."