

**WORLD LANGUAGES
AND CULTURES IN THE
PUBLIC SPHERE**

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SELECTED PROCEEDINGS OF THE
25TH SOUTHEAST CONFERENCE ON
LANGUAGES, LITERATURES, AND FILM

EDITED BY
MARGIT GRIEB, WILL LEHMAN AND
YVES-ANTOINE CLEMMEN



BrownWalker Press
Irvine & Boca Raton

*World Languages and Cultures in the Public Sphere:
Selected Proceedings of the 25th Southeast Conference on Languages,
Literatures, and Film*

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BrownWalker Press / Universal Publishers, Inc.
Irvine, California & Boca Raton, Florida • USA
www.BrownWalkerPress.com
2024

ISBN: 978-1-59942-648-8 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-1-59942-649-5 (ebk.)

Typeset by Medlar Publishing Solutions Pvt Ltd, India
Cover art by Clutter Beckwith
Cover design by Ivan Popov

US Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available at <https://lcn.loc.gov>

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Introduction

The Southeast Conference on Languages, Literatures, and Film (SCFLLF) celebrated two important anniversaries in 2023. The Conference turned forty, and it convened for the 25th time. The SCFLLF was supported through generous funding from the University of South Florida Research and Innovation and received financial, administrative, and organizational assistance from the Department of World Languages at Western Carolina University. Further support came from the American Chinese Friendship Society of Western North Carolina.

In the decades since its inception, it never veered from its original goal to serve as a showcase for scholarship in the humanities with a special emphasis on non-English language area studies. As organizers and participants celebrated these anniversaries, it was not lost on anyone that it was also a fitting occasion to reflect on the enduring significance of the humanities in the face of mounting challenges. In a climate where the humanities are increasingly devalued and subjected to political pressures favoring more ostensibly pragmatic fields, the conference serves as a reminder that we are still relevant as navigators and advocates of intellectual exploration, critical thinking, and cultural understanding. Organizers and participants not only commemorated the past but reaffirmed the enduring importance of the humanities in shaping a holistic and intellectually vibrant future.

The conference was inaugurated by the Department of Foreign Languages at Rollins College, when organizers invited scholars to meet in Winter Park, Florida in February of 1983. It started out as a dedicated national forum for scholars in Romance languages and literatures. Bolstered by its initial success, organizers embraced the opportunity to broaden its scope, and the conference evolved into an international gathering, addressing a diverse array of non-English languages, literatures, cinemas, and other cultural expressions. This expansion of focus not only enriched the scholarly discourse but also fostered a vibrant cross-cultural exchange, solidifying the conference as a popular scholarly forum with an enthusiastic following. Due to the growing numbers of participants and the concomitant increase in organizational effort, Rollins College teamed up with both the University of Central Florida (UCF) and Stetson University in Deland, Florida, and changed its annual format to a biennial meeting hosted by the three institutions in alternating years. UCF eventually withdrew from the conference cooperative, but Rollins and Stetson continued to host, allowing the SCFLLF to thrive and grow, attracting

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national and international scholars as well as keynote speakers of significant scholarly renown.

In the new millennium, only Stetson University continued providing institutional support, and Dr. Yves Clemmen, then the sole organizer, decided to approach me at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa, to become a new collaborator and USF a sponsor, in order to preserve the conference's future. From 2008 until 2020, the conference alternated between the two respective institutions. In 2022, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizers decided to postpone the conference for one year, and to invite Western Carolina University (WCU) to join as a new host. Dr. Will Lehman, who had already served as a co-organizer for many years, enthusiastically agreed to welcome the 25th Southeast Conference on Languages, Literatures, and Film to Western Carolina University's Biltmore Park instructional site in Asheville, North Carolina on March 9th through March 10th, 2023.

As in previous years, the conference welcomed papers on all aspects of literature, linguistics, culture, philosophy, cultural history, film, applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and pedagogy pertaining to non-English languages (ancient and modern). The conference theme in Asheville, North Carolina – Public Spheres - Past/Present/Future – attracted scholars who revisited and further developed the implications of the concept of *Öffentlichkeit*, originally conceived by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in the early 1960s, in his socio-historical study *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*.

In this monograph, which also served as his *Habilitationsschrift*, Habermas traces the historical development of a bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well as its subsequent decline. He defined the *bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit* as a social space where citizens come together as equals to discuss and debate matters of common concern. It is a realm in conflict (*im Spannungsfeld*) with the state and society (172) and enmeshed with the sphere inhabited by private people, who congregate in coffeehouses in London, salons in France, and *Tischgesellschaften* in Germany. *Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit* allows for open and rational discourse that contributes to the formation of public opinion. Habermas acknowledges in his original treatise and in subsequent commentaries that the idealized public sphere he describes has faced challenges and transformations over time, especially in the context of contemporary capitalist societies.

When Habermas's seminal work finally achieved international acclaim after a translation into English by Thomas Burger appeared almost three decades later, in 1989, it spurred a rigorous debate among scholars who met shortly after at a conference on the theme. Habermas himself presented at the conference and added his own evolving thoughts on the

subject, later published as “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,” (1992). In this essay Habermas concedes that the use of media power for manipulative purposes has fundamentally undermined the innocence of the “principle of publicity” (437). The public sphere has been restructured and controlled by mass media and become a battleground where topic selection and contributions are the result of a strategically concealed battle for influence and control of the flow of information.

Critics have since argued that factors like commercialization, media concentration, and the exclusion of certain voices further undermine the idealized version of the public sphere that Habermas envisions. Nancy Fraser, for example, has offered a feminist expansion and revision of Habermas's work in “Rethinking the Public Sphere” (1991). Fraser acknowledges the significance of the public sphere as a site for democratic deliberation but urges a reconsideration of its structure and dynamics. She argues that commercialization, along with other factors, such as the increasing influence of mass media and the exclusion of certain marginalized voices, has led to the distortion of the public sphere. She contends that the public sphere has become dominated by economic interests, contributing to the marginalization of groups and individuals who lack access to resources. This, according to Fraser, results in a situation where only certain perspectives and issues gain visibility and influence, while others are sidelined.

In “The Public Sphere in the Field of Power,” Craig Calhoun contends that these marginalized or oppressed groups create alternative public spheres, “counterpublics,” as a response to their exclusion or limited representation in the dominant public sphere. He explains that counterpublics often emerge when certain groups feel that their voices are marginalized or excluded from mainstream public discourse. These counterpublics “contested the hegemonic construction of dominant publics” (303) and provide spaces for individuals to express their identities, concerns, and experiences, fostering a sense of community and resistance in the form of social movements.¹

Habermas is still participating in shaping an evolving concept of the public sphere. In 2022, he offered “Reflections and Hypotheses” on the effects the digital revolution has had on the role of the media in the political public sphere. He sees this influence as potentially leading to “fragmentation [...] and a simultaneously unbounded public sphere” (160) all while “empowering all potential users in principle to become independent

¹ For more critical thoughts on the public sphere see Eley (1992), Benson (2009), Singh (2012), Adut (2012), Calhoun (2017), among others.

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and equally entitled authors” (159). Habermas points out that digital companies, particularly the social media platforms, are only interested in profits and not taking responsibility for, i.e. neither producing, editing, nor selecting, the content that others produce. They “initiate and intensify discourses with unpredictable contents” (159) and therefore affect how and what the public communicates. He agrees with Jarren and Fischer who have termed this the “platformization of the public sphere,” a digitalization of the public sphere to which traditional investigative and news journalism has had difficulty adapting, and which constitutes a development that ultimately poses a threat to democracy. Values that support democracy are being replaced by the business model of social media companies who are primarily guided by getting the attention of consumers (attention economy). Whereas the non-digital public sphere was an inclusive space, the new spaces, neither entirely public nor private, reject dissonant for consonant voices. He concludes, somewhat pessimistically, that the emancipatory promise of new media to offer unregulated and unfiltered communication is “drowned out by the desolate cacophony in fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers”(159). Therefore, social media companies should be compelled to step up and intervene in content dissemination, so that the inclusive character of the public sphere can be revived.

Two other important German theorists, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, also contributed to Habermas’s original thoughts on the nature and purpose of the public sphere before his ideas became widely disseminated through his book’s English translation. Negt and Kluge expanded upon Habermas’s original concept in *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (1972), by providing a more socially differentiated and historically grounded analysis, acknowledging the role of class, work, and production in shaping public spheres. Their work has formed much of the recent scholarship of the keynote speaker at the 25th SCFLLF, Dr. Richard Langston, Professor of German at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Langston adapts the sociological concept of the public sphere to a humanities realm by connecting public spaces with social desires as expressed in modern and contemporary European literature, with a particular focus on the present, post-literary and technologically mediated world. For Dr. Langston narrative is an inherently social enterprise, and in his keynote address he described how German post-WWII fiction in literature and cinema acts on social desires by employing technology in its narratives, and either “fostering or subverting the possibility of forming bonds in a democratic liberal society.”

Dr. Langston's presentation provided a thought-provoking discursive focus on which other presenters at the 25th SCFLLF expanded. The conference featured papers on topics dealing with public discourse, shared experiences, public opinion, global public spheres, as well as the opposite, the private sphere, in all its manifestations. Sixty-one national and international scholars presented their research. Presenters gave talks on how literature, visual and online media, as well as art, comment on and intervene in public spheres dominated by other media, as well as how they represent such disruptions. Others discussed what role language plays in the public sphere and contemplated how language teaching is enhanced by the use of new media functions.

The essays in this volume represent a relatively small selection of the papers that were presented at the SCFLLF. The contributions all continue and add to the discourse of an evolving public sphere using diverse perspectives to explore a variety of contexts in which this concept appears and reappears. The anthology is organized into four sections exploring the public sphere in world cinema, world literature, in European and Middle Eastern Culture, and in the language classroom.

Part I: The Public Sphere in World Cinema

In their essay "Public Space in Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D*" Antonio Melchor and Thomas J. DiSalvo explore how De Sica's most uncompromising film reflects on the "public sphere" as physical space. They focus on De Sica's representation of these spaces – a public square, a soup kitchen, a hospital, a dog pound, and a park – which a pensioner in danger of becoming homeless encounters in his search for a solution to his problem. The authors argue that De Sica represents these places as hostile and degrading. They point out that this is consistent with the undercurrent of skepticism towards the possibility of public amelioration (or even understanding) of individual human suffering that can be found throughout De Sica's other films. They conclude that De Sica's work is not a call to undertake a large public project of social betterment, but an appeal to the individual viewer's capacity for empathy.

The second contribution turns to African cinema, specifically to a Nigerian documentary film written and directed by Aicha Macky. Infertility, often associated with women in various societies, emerges as a public concern addressed by the film director in *L'Arbre sans fruit*. Cinema serves as a potent medium to articulate the unspoken challenges of infertility, enabling Macky to critique and alleviate societal pressures on women. In her essay, "Fonctions de la voix off et autonomisation de la femme dans *L'Arbre sans fruit*," Amina Saidou explores Macky's strategic use of voiceover amplifying female voices, challenging stereotypes, stigma, and accusations

linked to infertility. Macky advocates for women, bearing witness to their lived experiences. Her feminist commitment is evident in the aesthetic choices the director makes. The compelling ingenuity employed to address infertility not only raises awareness but also resonates with collective sensitivities.

The next essay “Representaciones de hegemonía y exclusión social, física y simbólica en la película *La zona* (2007) de Rodrigo Plá,” by José A. Badillo Carlos considers the cinema of Latin America. Due to the violence that has affected México and Latin America in general in the last two decades, more private and gated communities have emerged to provide their residents protection from urban violence in public spaces. Through theories proposed by Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and others, Badillo’s essay examines Rodrigo Plá’s film *La Zona* and its representations of authority, violence, precarious lives, and the importance of discourse in private and public spheres. The film raises questions about the disruptive intersection between social classes and the fragmentation of urban areas, which forges precedents to generate a new discursive space. Despite contrasting views, the discourse is manipulated as the collective and personal interests of the hegemonic group develop to defend their space by surpassing the laws and legitimizing violence.

Heike Scharm also investigates cultural productions of Latin America in her essay “Outside the Public Sphere: Counter-Discourses on Violence in Peru and Paraguay.” In particular, she focuses on two cases in literature and film addressing violence against indigenous communities in Latin America from the time of colonization until today. In both works, a short novel written in response to the impunity of massacres in Peru in the 1980s and a recent Uruguayan documentary on the massacre at Marina Kue in 2010, Scharm recognizes a conscious effort to address the conflation of official, state-sponsored discourse and the public sphere, as well as a critical awareness of the consistent, historic exclusion of the indigenous population from the latter. At the same time, Scharm proposes that both works are in themselves evidence of the successful construction of what she calls counter-spheres: the use of public space (real and virtual) through oral traditions, such as non-scripted theatre performances, dance, and chants. Rather than an effort to regain access to the public sphere, these counter-spheres lay claim to their rightful place within history and national identity, rejecting the tools of the lettered city.

Part II: The Public Sphere in World Literature

The next section in this collection turns to literary works that explore aspects of the public sphere. In “Public Spaces in the Essays of Julio Camba,” Mark Couture offers a closer look at the Spanish essayist Julio

Camba (1884-1962). Camba is perhaps most famous for his writings about gastronomy, yet as a young man, his anarchistic ideas were extreme enough to get him expelled from Argentina. His sympathy for the fascists during the Spanish Civil War might explain the paucity of critical engagement with his writings. An avid traveler and observer of customs, his essays deal extensively with countries other than his native Spain. Couture explores Camba's ideas about restaurants ("La democracia en el restaurant"), the *matanza* (the slaughter of pigs, a communal ritual in small Spanish towns), and European café society. While some of Camba's writings today seem quaint, dated, even racist, others are remarkably contemporary and maintain the humor and perceptiveness that they had when originally published as far back as the 1920s.

Yves-Antoine Clemmen also explores the role of public spaces within literary works in his "Amélie Nothomb, a Genre Transcending the Private and Public Spheres." Amélie Nothomb has long protected her private sphere, paradoxically by reinventing it in the public sphere as she controls her story in a literary genre between fiction and biography. She is an author for whom the work and the person, the literary and the real, the fiction and the physical, the private and the public feed each other in a blurred contiguity, a world without borders. Her 2010 novel *Une forme de vie* is the perfect example of this strange negotiation of the public and the private and serves as a metaphor for her whole oeuvre.

In his essay "Fake News, Sex Talk, and the Porfirian Public Sphere in Two Plays from Nineteenth-Century Mexico," Kevin M. Anzzolin examines two short plays from Porfirian Mexico, interpreting them as attempts to symbolically configure a type of public sphere. Mariano Sánchez Santos's *El repórter* (1902) as well as José Ignacio González and Julio B. Uranga's *El pájaro azul* (1908) – both lowbrow, remarkably popular works – humorously and nervously express anxiety surrounding the democratizing elements of the press. While *El repórter* (The Reporter) explores whether fake, sensationalistic news can upend traditional notions of class and gender, *El pájaro azul* (The Blue Bird) likens revolutionary politics and opposition journalism to licentiousness – a corollary to sexual anarchy. Ultimately, both plays activate social scientific discourses – what Michel Foucault theorized as the human sciences – as ideological apparatuses meant to define the contours (and participants) of Mexico's public sphere.

In the last contribution in Part II, "Nuevas humanidades": *transcorporalidad y poshumanismo en la ficción española contemporánea*," Javier Cataño García argues that the story "Mil euros por tu vida" (Elia Barceló, 2003) and the novels *Doctor Zibelius* (Jesús Ferrero, 2014) and *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (Rosa Montero, 2011) transcend the human and post-human divide. They recognize the reality and dignity of post-human protagonists and integrate them into the public spaces of future societies. Cataño draws

upon the concepts of transcorporeality and the mesh – which assert that all forms of life are part of the same web of living things – to show that, despite the complex differences in physical makeup, social statuses and ways of thinking, the protagonists of these stories form relationships that move beyond a dualistic and hierarchical perception of life from humanity’s perspective.

Part III: The Public Sphere in European and Arab Culture

David Graber’s “The European Cultural Ideal as a National Priority” describes the “European cultural ideal” as a value and belief system under which people assign importance to aesthetic phenomena such as literature, art, music, dance, etc. For centuries, this cultural ideal has served to guide “the well-lived life” and the “self-actualization” of individual and society in Europe. As discussed earlier, Jürgen Habermas, in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, traces how the cultured public of the early bourgeois age formed opinions and asserted themselves in society – only to acquiesce to the media and market forces in the present time. Although his focus is on the public’s assertion of rights vis-à-vis the state, this study returns attention to the “cultured public sphere.” It challenges Habermas’ deeply pessimistic vision, presenting evidence from seven case studies to argue that, despite the dominance of media and market forces, state elites continue to promote the ideal as a national priority.

In my essay “*Doppelpunkt, Sternchen, oder ...?: Public Discourse on Gender in Germany*,” I discuss the use of gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language in Germany’s public media. I survey the arguments for and against language adjustments in the (*öffentlich-rechtlichen*) TV and radio channels and in the traditional newspaper outlets, as well as the reactions of the public to various de-gendering strategies. I concede that the topic is not unique to Germany – these discussions are going on in many countries – but point out that the complications associated with implementation as well as the public reaction to strategies are language-specific and that this language specificity guiding the de-gendering strategies also affects the public discourse that has emerged. Moreover, I contend, that the discussions can tell us much about the state of the public sphere as it exists in 21-century Germany.

Kamilia Rahmouni also discusses linguistic aspects in public discourse in her “Exploring the Populist Rhetoric in the Tunisian President’s Speech of July 25th: A Path to Save Tunisia.” Rahmouni examines the linguistic and discursive specificities of Tunisian populism in President Kaïs Saïed’s pivotal speech on July 25th, 2021, amid widespread protests against Tunisia’s political and economic challenges. Combining insights

from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Cognitive Linguistics, specifically Image Schemata Theory, this essay analyzes the populist rhetorical lexicon employed by the President. Through a detailed CDA of the various image schemata used, this article reveals that the President's oratory embodies key features of populist discourse, including a stark dichotomy between the "virtuous ordinary" people (us) and the "nefarious corrupt" elite (them), a condemnation of these elites, and the portrayal of Kais Saïed as a populist leader poised to save Tunisia, its state, and its society. In doing so, this essay contributes to a nuanced understanding of populist language in contemporary political contexts, both in Tunisia and the broader Middle East and North Africa region.

In the final essay of Part III, "*Schwarzfahrer*: The Tram as Public Sphere," Stephan K. Schindler analyzes Pepe Danquart's short film *Schwarzfahrer* (Black Rider, 1993), a commentary on Germany's multicultural conflicts in the 1990s. These conflicts come to the surface in the public transportation system where people of all social classes and ethnicities encounter each other by necessity. The film's complex mise-en-scène stages the passengers on a tram as a mirror of unified Germany's multicultural society and its potential detractors. Schindler argues that the film reveals and questions German so-called *Sekundärtugenden* (secondary virtues, such as order, believe in authority, apathy in public, etc.) and addresses the continuity of racism and xenophobia in Germany.

Part IV: The Public Sphere in the Language Classroom

This concluding section contemplates what role the language classroom plays in public discourse in the public sphere. In her essay "The Beginner Language Classroom through the Lens of Public Discourse: Practical Implementation of Equitable Pedagogy Concepts," Snezhana Zheltoukhova discussed the integration of equitable pedagogy concepts into the coursework of beginning language learners. The extensive use of technology and digital media expands the definition of a language classroom as a part of public discourse, rendering student voices objects of public scrutiny. The pedagogical application of the main principles of equitable pedagogy allows beginner students to be assertive regardless of their language skill levels. In particular, Zheltoukhova's essay showcases how creating a unique identity wheel helps students strengthen their voices in the educational public sphere, while also establishing a safe and nurturing environment for emergent opinions and self-representations.

The final contribution in this collection is by Will Lehman, one of the co-editors of this volume. In his essay "Chat(bot)ting Up a Storm: How AI Is Changing the Game in Foreign Language Teaching," he demon-

strates how the unbridled collection of publicly available texts on the Internet and the use of this data in the training of large language models is massively disrupting foreign language education, particularly with regard to the assignment of at-home writing. Using these LLMs, students are able to generate original texts that are increasingly indistinguishable from human-written ones. At the same time, he argues, these tools provide instructors with innovative ways not only to enhance their own materials and generate completely new ones, but also to teach their students to use these tools in ways that will increase their engagement with the language they are learning and speed up the learning process.

Although the essays in this volume do not necessarily all engage specifically with Jürgen Habermas's original concept of the significance of *Öffentlichkeit* in a liberal democracy, they showcase a rich tapestry and conceptual breadth that his concept has inspired since the 1960s. The essays collected here not only build on the historical foundations of the public sphere but also propel forward the dialogue on its contemporary relevance and future trajectories. The SCFLLF conference in Asheville, North Carolina, and this collection of selected papers, will hopefully inspire scholars to continue unraveling the intricate connections between language, culture, and the evolving dynamics of the public sphere in our ever-changing world.

Margit Grieb
University of South Florida

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Part I: The Public Sphere in World Cinema

Public Space in Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D*

Thomas DiSalvo & Antonio Melchor

Neorealist films sought to contribute to the growth of human solidarity and empathy with the plight of others. But the films of Vittorio De Sica, one of the great neorealist directors, often contain an undercurrent of skepticism toward the possibility of public amelioration (or even understanding) of individual human suffering. That skepticism is often focused on public spaces, which in De Sica's films are usually represented as hostile and degrading places. This is nowhere truer than in *Umberto D*, a film which Robert Cardullo describes as perhaps neorealism's "quintessential film" and which André Bazin believed displayed the greatest fidelity to the aesthetic of neorealism (Cardullo 73; Bazin 112).

Umberto D is the story of a pensioner, a man who was a public employee for 30 years, and who is now alone in the world and is threatened with the loss of his home, a room he rents in a boarding house that has become too expensive for him. His greedy and unfeeling landlady, whom Umberto had sheltered and helped during the war, wants him out of his apartment so that she can be free to glide into the new era of prosperity that was felt to be (and was in fact) right around the corner in the Italy in this period. She would like to enter the Italy of what would eventually be called the "economic miracle" without the depressing reminder of the past that Umberto would be if he continued to live in her home. In this respect, the landlady resembles the contemporary Italian filmgoers who were ignoring *Umberto D* and films like it in favor of escapist and American films. To this point, Torunn Halaand writes that *Umberto D* "was far removed from a people ready for future prosperity" (140).

The boarding house that Umberto is in the process of being dislodged from is being transformed by the upwardly-mobile landlady into what she imagines as a respectable middle-class home for herself and for the fiancée that she will soon marry. There is, literally, no room for Umberto in her new life.

Umberto's room, soon to be no more, is essential to his identity, and he states that he would rather kill himself than end up in a what he calls a "public dormitory," in our terms, a homeless shelter. In the course of his struggle to avoid the disaster of homelessness, Umberto will journey through a number public spaces: a public square, a cafeteria, a hospital, a

dog pound, and a park. They sound innocuous enough, but for a man who has almost nothing and is looking for money, looking for help, looking, indeed, for his salvation, they become circles of hell. As we watch Umberto spiraling down into what soon starts to feel like his inevitable catastrophe, these public spaces have nothing to offer him except mockery, humiliation, and terror. Whatever glimmers of comfort or hope Umberto thinks he can see in them soon reveal themselves to be illusory.

The film begins in a public square, a *piazza*. It opens with a public protest by, we soon make out, pensioners demanding an increase in their retirement benefits. The signs that they carry make it clear that they cannot survive on what they currently receive. In Italian, *la piazza* designates not only the physical space of a public square, but is also a metonymy for public-initiated political speech. And we may start to imagine that what we are seeing here is civil society at work, legitimate grievances being aired and responsibly being taken up by the powers that be. But this is not what is going on here. The police are ready for the protestors, and before the pensioners can even state their case, the police scatter them like ants that have invaded a picnic. The pensioners' insignificance is stressed by the aerial shots of the dispersal. Some of the policemen do their job with bored indifference, but others take a malicious glee in their task: they have fun terrorizing the old men by chasing them around with their jeeps.

This was no misunderstanding or accident. The authorities had denied the pensioners a permit for this demonstration, and when the pensioners were desperate enough to march without it, the police used their lack of a permit as an excuse to silence them, and to give them a little whacking to boot.

In the aftermath of the scattering, we see a small group of the protesters who have found shelter, and among them is the protagonist of the film, Umberto. In the course of introductions and conversation, he quickly reveals that he is in desperate financial straits, burdened down with debt and with no family to assist him. Over half of his monthly pension goes toward rent (10, 000 of the 18,000 lire that he receives per month). He offers to sell his watch to the other men, and this makes them wary of him and eager to escape his company.

Not only can Umberto not expect anything from the state, he can't even establish the most minimal kind of friendship with his fellow sufferers, who are as alienated from each other as they are from the world that has forgotten them.

The next scene takes place in a public cafeteria. Umberto is seated at a communal table with other old men. He appears to be eating, but what he is actually doing is secretly feeding his dog Flike, who is under the table. At the table, Umberto again tries to sell his watch, showing and offering

it to the men eating there. There are no takers. When Umberto is on his way out, a woman who appears to be the manager of the cafeteria warns him that she saw him feeding his dog and that if he does it again, she will kick him and his dog out. “sbatto fuori Lei e il cane,” she says. The cafeteria worker threatens to do again to Umberto what the police had already done to him earlier: remove his unwelcome presence

Umberto leaves the cafeteria with one of the men who was at his table. It turns out that this man *is* willing to buy Umberto’s watch, but only at a much lower price than that which Umberto was seeking. Umberto is desperate and he agrees. There is one more thing, though: Umberto must accept payment in handfuls of crumpled, small-denomination bills. It turns out that the buyer of the watch makes his money by begging, so that’s how it accumulates. The desperate reality glimpsed by Umberto in this transaction is dizzying for him: he, a retired state worker, is poorer than, and at the economic mercy of, a panhandler. But Umberto is desperate and has to accept. He needs that money, even if it is far less than the watch is worth, and even if it is in dirty little crumpled bills scrounged together by a beggar.

After a trying day like this one, there would be nothing better than just getting back home. But for Umberto, where he lives is becoming less and less his home. The first scene of Umberto getting back home after his rough day misleads us into expecting to see him in his place of refuge and comfort, the one place that is the opposite of the harrowing world outside. A sign on the inside of the door quotes the inscription that the poet Ludovico Ariosto placed above the entrance to his house, *parva domus sed apta mihi*, “a small house, but right for me.” But this sign is on the inside of the front door, not the door to Umberto’s room. The house of course belongs to the landlady, not to Umberto. Ariosto’s complete inscription, not seen on the sign, continues by expressing the pride of ownership, stating that his house is “not subject to anyone else, not indecorous, and bought with [his] own money.” None of this applies to Umberto. His room certainly *is* subject to others: he is startled to find it occupied by a couple in his bed when he gets home after lunch, and is subsequently shocked to discover that the landlady has rented it out by the hour to friends of hers who are having an affair. That’s hardly decorous! Nor is the room “paid for with his [Umberto’s] own money.” We now learn that Umberto’s desperate need for money is due to the back rent that he owes the landlady, who continually keeps raising his rent. As she is engaged in a strategy of forcing Umberto out of his room, she will not accept the partial payment that Umberto offers her. She hopes to run out the clock on him and get to the date when lack of payment will legally allow her to evict him. It is of no concern to her that Umberto will not be able to find an alternative: any hole in the wall, Umberto says, even if mice-ridden,

will cost him a minimum of 20,000 lire a month. Remember that he receives a total monthly pension of 18,000 lire. The landlady informs Umberto that he will receive his eviction notice by the end of the month.

If we thought that Umberto's room was his place of refuge, we were wrong. What we thought might be the opposite of the menacing locations of public space turns out to be their copy. Like the police, like the cafeteria manager, Umberto's landlady has only threats and banishment for him.

While Umberto waits for the landlady's friends to vacate his room, he has a conversation with the landlady's maid Maria. Umberto's relationship to Maria is the closest thing that he has to a friendship. But it is not a relationship of obligation, and at the end of the day both Umberto and Maria are too marginal to offer the other any real assistance when it is needed.

While they are talking, Maria continues to carry out her daily tasks, and we see a curious scene: she is scattering a swarm of ants that she just can't get rid of. It is a detail that seems insignificant, but we are reminded of the fate of the protesting pensioners in the first scene.

Before preparing to go to bed, Umberto had asked Maria for a thermometer because he was not feeling well. And earlier, at the cafeteria, he had mentioned feeling a soreness in his throat. He feels worse in the course of the night and he telephones the hospital for medical assistance. Hospital workers come to take him away, and he asks Maria to take care of Flike while he is gone.

The hospital where Umberto ends up is a soul-crushing place. It is church-run, and this makes its nature a little ambiguous. Not so much a place of healing as a place where the sick poor go to die and the healthy poor go to finagle free lodging and meals by pretending to be sick and by currying the favor of the nuns, who seem to have final say over the recommendations of the doctors. In an environment like this, the doctors treat the patients with great suspicion and contempt. The doctor who examines Umberto recommends brushing some iodine on his tonsils and releasing him. He adds that if Umberto were younger, he would recommend a tonsillectomy, but at his age, the doctor continues, what's the point?

Umberto has one unexpected moment of happiness in the hospital. Maria walks into the room, and he can hardly believe it. He imagines that she has thought of him and has come to visit him! Why, she even brought him a banana as a treat. He greets her with a warmth that we have not previously seen him show. But alas, while Maria's affection and concern are not feigned, what she has really come to do, and she does it tactfully and discretely, as if it were just part of their chatting, is to deliver a message: the landlady is going to get married, so she is going to need Umberto's room. She is going to turn it and the adjacent room into a large

sitting and reception room. Umberto does not take the news well, and starts ranting about how it's not going to happen. But, as soon as she has delivered her message, Maria suddenly no longer has time to chat. She says that she has got to be going, and is out the door before Umberto has even stopped talking.

Somehow, Umberto thinks he may still have a chance of keeping his room. He figures that if he can stay at the hospital a little while, he can save some additional money towards his cause. The man in the bed next to Umberto's is an experienced hospital sponger. The doctor who examined Umberto also examined him and said, with disgust, "this guy is healthier than I am." He wanted to release him, but the nun in charge, who had already been entreated, managed to extend the sponger's stay. This is the guy who will show Umberto how to work things to his advantage in the hospital.

This is an important stage in Umberto's downward spiral. Here in the hospital, he must learn shamelessness and manipulation. Begging and pretending to be pious are the rewarded actions here. "Ask one of the nuns for a rosary," advises Umberto's con-artist Virgil. And it works. Believing that she is saving a soul, the nurse extends Umberto's stay so that he can receive the "full treatment."

When Umberto is released from the hospital, he feels good. He has been eating, receiving treatment, and resting. He is excited about resuming his life. But when he gets back to the boarding house, it is in mid-transformation. (But really, he should have expected this. He was warned.) His room is filled with workmen. It is unrecognizable, and unusable. But the really terrible thing is that Flike has gone missing. Umberto's desperate search for money suddenly becomes an even more desperate search for his beloved dog. Umberto is now scared, furious, and in real emergency mode. And the next public space that he crosses will mirror and amplify his anguish with a new intensity.

The municipal dog pound where Umberto goes to look for Flike is of course loud with barking dogs. That's to be expected. But the pound is also quite regimented, in a way that seems excessive. It is certainly not a *shelter* for dogs. We see gas chambers. We see personnel in antiseptic lab coats and with writing pads. As we look around, with Umberto, we notice that the people who come here hoping to find their lost dogs and are lucky enough to find them can be divided into two groups: those who can afford the administrative fee to reclaim their dogs and those who can't. Those who can't, however, will leave with one certainty: their pets *will* be put to death. The dog pound is a thinly veiled concentration camp, a place whose primary purpose is to exterminate innocent living beings.

Amazingly, Umberto finds Flike. It is the happiest and most painful moment in the film. He has found Flike, but now what? He can't afford