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THE UNBEARABLE COST OF DEVELOPMENT AND PRINTING PLANTS.
TECHNOSPES, LITMUS PAPER ON TECHNO-INDUSTRIAL PROBLEMS
IN THE 1970S ITALIAN CINEMA

Matteo Citrini

In 1963, Ettore Catalucci, dean pioneer of the film development and printing sector, voiced his concerns about the cinematographic industry's crisis and the excessive focus on technological innovation in an article in "Araldo dello spettacolo" significantly entitled *Appeal to wisdom*: "Enough of the madness, of the desperate search for the miraculous and monopolistic system. [...] How many serious or named societies have gone bust to follow this delusion of the technically majestic and exclusive product?"¹ In hindsight, Catalucci's voice appears to have been like that of Cassandra, a warning that went unheeded and foretold the inevitable decline of the prominent development and printing houses that had marked the Italian cinematographic industry nearly from its beginnings.²

The aim of this paper is to look into the most important techno-industrial operation implemented in the sector to break such vicious circle: the merger of the two large Roman companies Tecnostampa and Spes, which, along with the English Rank Film Laboratories, gave birth to Technospes in 1972. In examining Technospes' dramatic experience and the reasons for its failure, special emphasis will be placed on the technical and material features that distinguish it. Above all, the plant will serve as a litmus paper for reading, on the one hand, the specificities of the industrial reality of Italian cinema and, on the other, the great historical and cultural transformations that conditioned it.³

Italian development and printing societies in the Sixties

According to Paul McDonald, media industries are always a crossroads of the interests of numerous stakeholders who collaborate and compete with one another. For this reason, "They

1 E. Catalucci, *Appello alla saggezza*, "Araldo dello Spettacolo", 19(88), 1963, p. 1 (here and after, personal translation from Italian quotes). On the life and work of Catalucci, see: Febian, *Quarant'anni di silenziosa operosità*, "Araldo dello spettacolo", 24(37), 1969, p. 2; V. Previtali, *L'anarchico in pellicola. Ettore Catalucci e la ricerca della perfetta luce*, Teso Editore, Roma 2021.

2 For a definition of the development and printing sector in the cinematographic industry, see: M. Bernardo, *Sviluppo e stampa* ([https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sviluppo-e-stampa_\(Enciclopedia-del-Cinema\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sviluppo-e-stampa_(Enciclopedia-del-Cinema)/)); D. Case, *Film Technology in Post-Production*, Focal Press, Oxford et al., 2001.

3 In reconstructing the history of Technospes and, more generally, of the Italian Technical Industries, we have relied on the collaboration of various sources and archives. Above all, the ANICA archive in Oppido Lucano (PZ), the societal dossiers at the Chamber of Commerce of Rome, and the oral testimony of some of the protagonists' heirs, in particular Finestauri and Calzini families.

represent an arena of cultural and economic power, enacted at micro- and macro-scales, in which participants contest the range of cultural expressions and meanings generated and how the commercial value of culture should be accumulated and invested”.⁴ The same truth applies to Italian cinematography following WWII, as evidenced by various recent studies. In this regard, Mariapia Comand and Simone Venturini have observed that: “The Italian industrial system has navigated the complexity of multiple dynamics in action, in the intertwining of forces in the field often in antagonism with each other, reacting to tensions and internal and international contradictions [...]”.⁵ In the resulting galaxy, technical industries have played a role that has frequently been viewed as auxiliary to production, when they have been able to carve out their own autonomous and reasonably defined sector. In fact, since 1953, the Unione Nazionale delle Industrie Tecniche Cinematografiche (UNITC) within the Associazione Nazionale delle Industrie Cinematografiche e Affini (ANICA) has formed four groups that will remain relatively stable for several decades and represents the different souls of the technical industry (Fig. 1): the Production Studios Group, the Development and Printing Factories Group, the Recording and Dubbing Factories Group, and the Auxiliary Industries Group.⁶ UNITC discursive production is a valuable resource for understanding the power dynamics of each group, as well as the relationship between them and the other spheres of ANICA.

It is not surprising that the development and printing sector has operated in those years as the union’s driving voice, with Alberto Genesi of Tecnostampa holding the presidency from 1953 to 1966.⁷ We are, after all, in the midst of the transition to colour film, which stresses the Italian industry’s capabilities in competing with foreign competitors (namely Technicolor).⁸ The colour shift in Italy was led by two main companies: Tecnostampa, owned by the Genesi family, and Spes, controlled by Ettore Catalucci (Fig. 2). In just a few years, both of them were outfitted with specialized colour plants that served as benchmarks for national processing and were directed by two of the foremost experts of the field: the engineer Mario Calzini for Tecnostampa and the law-graduated Elio Finestauri for Spes.⁹

Alongside them, there were a number of other significant Roman plants in the sector (e.g., Staco, S.A.C.I., and Fototecnica). As Carla Mereu Keating points out, such abundance

4 P. McDonald, *Media, Industries, Research. Problematizing the field*, in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries* Id. (ed.), Routledge, London and New York 2022, p. 1.

5 M. Comand, S. Venturini, MMC47’76. *Modi, memorie e culture della produzione cinematografica: strumenti, metodi e primi esiti*, “L’Avventura. International Journal of Film and Media Landscapes”, 7(special issue), 2021, p. 4. On the topic, see also: V. Buccheri, L. Malavasi, *La materia dei sogni. L’impresa cinematografica in Italia*, Carocci, Roma 2006; L. Barra, T. Bonini, S. Splendore (eds.), *Backstage. Studi sulla produzione dei media in Italia*, Unicopli, Milano 2016; M. Giordana, E. Ugenti, *Culture e pratiche della produzione. Il cinema italiano tra gli anni cinquanta e gli anni settanta*, Marsilio, Venezia 2024.

6 See: ANICA, *L’industria cinematografica italiana 1953*, S.A.E.T., Roma 1953, pp. 95-100.

7 When Luigi De Laurentiis succeeded him: “Il nuovo direttivo delle industrie tecniche”, *Cinema d’oggi*, 5(45), 1971, p. 5.

8 On the topic, see: F. Pierotti, *Prima di Totò a colori. Il passaggio al colore nel cortometraggio italiano (1949-1952)*, *Cabiria*, ???, 2013, pp. 4-17; Id., *Un’archeologia del colore nel cinema italiano. Dal Technicolor ad Antonioni*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2016.

9 P.C., *Pionieri della produzione del film a colori in Italia, Un treno di ricordi. Bollettino AIC*, 1997, pp. 35-37.

was the result from the last wave of infrastructural expenditures planned by the fascist government in the 1940s to boost national film output.¹⁰ Thanks to the data about movie credits kindly granted by ANICA, we were not only able to census them, but also to estimate the percentage of films covered by each of them from 1944 to 1975. Out of 1274 films, Spes worked the 32% and Tecnostampa the 21%, meaning that Genesi and Catalucci together accounted for more than half of the total development and printing production in those decades.

However, the importance assumed in the sector should not be misleading: the economic situation of the development and printing houses can never be said to be stable, not even during the golden years of Italian cinema. Always in the background important problems loomed: the high cost required for processing the film and for the continuous updating of the machinery, to which was added a condition of oversizing compared to the market demand. Furthermore, there was no lack of less legitimate forms of competition: small companies offering price below the list approved by ANICA, but also the Istituto Luce, which, operating in a grey area of the Andreotti law (no. 958, 1949) first and Corona law (no. 1213, 1965) after, offered its services for the development and printing of fictional feature films. The rapport between the private companies and Luce was tense, to say the least, for over twenty years, during which the problem was never solved.¹¹ Additionally, around 1958 a Technicolor factory opened in Rome, which, even if under strong limits, soon revealed itself to be a fierce competitor: the economic steadiness of the American company and the sure entry of work made Technicolor a sought-after destination for many of the employees of the other Roman companies.¹²

This is why Catalucci's appeal seems timely even though it addresses the so-called "Hollywood on the Tiber": behind the grandeurs of Italian cinema, fundamental fissures in the technical industries were rapidly growing, and when the financial shrinkage intercepted the efforts for an up-to-date technological offer in an inflated and hypercompetitive reality, the cracks became chasms. Tecnostampa and Spes were not spared, but rather were hit hard by this convergence of factors, and, faced with a scenario that appeared to be of great change and instability brought by the progressive passage to a post-Fordist economy, they felt forced to seek new solutions.¹³

10 C. Mereu Keating, *Il 'centro del cinema mondiale'. La romanitas del settore produttivo tra istanze di decentramento e internazionalizzazione*, "L'Avventura. International Journal of Film and Media Landscapes", 9(special issue), 2023, p. 55.

11 The feud between Luce and the private development and printing companies lasted many years, with the latter continually asking regulatory action to limit Luce's activities. For a first testimony on the topic, see: ANICA, *L'attività dell'A.N.I.C.A. 1951-52*, Rome: S.A.E.T., 1952, p. 99.

12 On the first impact of the Italian Technicolor factory in UNITC, see: ANICA, *L'industria cinematografica*, Rome: Stab. Tipografico Carlo Colombo, 1960, pp. 79-86.

13 On the challenges of film industries facing post-Fordism, see, among others: M. Lorenzen, *Internationalization vs. Globalization of the Film Industry*, "Industry and Innovation", 14(4), pp. 349-357.

A two-headed giant: the Technospes merger

The Tecnostampa company for “development and printing of cinematographic films”¹⁴ opened its doors in 1925, in Via Albalonga 38, at the initiative of Vincenzo Genesi.¹⁵ After him, his sons Alberto, Giulio, and Carlo succeeded at the lead of the plant in the 1940s. Around 1950, the Genesis met Mario Calzini through the mediation of the Orlandi family, the Italian distributor of Agfacolor film, and hired him as Technical Director of their colour processing plant.

Facing the stagnation in the second half of the 1960s, a very unclear framework regulation regarding technical industries, and the development of a new market marked by strong competition and internationalisation, the Genesi family became interested in forming alliances with foreign countries.¹⁶ It so forged a collaboration with Rank Film Laboratories, an English counterpart, with the goal of establishing a hub capable of responding to the global sector crisis. In 1970, Tecnostampa became Technochrome.¹⁷ According to his end-of-year report, Alberto Genesi expressed cautious optimism about the future of the society: “The foundations for a profitable management have been laid, among other things, by purchasing machinery and equipment and making appropriate contacts with customers”.¹⁸ It was at that point that their historical competitor, Spes, also became interested in the operation and began to reach an agreement with the Genesis for a merger.

Founded by Ettore Catalucci in 1924 and with headquarters first in Via Nomentana and, from 1932, in Viale Campo Boario 56, Spes (originally an acronym for Sviluppo Pellicole E Stampa) was the Italian sector’s leader (Fig. 3).¹⁹ They strengthened their primacy after the colour turn, with the construction of what was described as “the largest colour factory in Europe” and directed by Elio Finestauri.²⁰ By the late 1960s, Spes had engaged in an effort to upgrade the technological department, spearheaded by the youthful and promising Ettore De’ Cinque-Quintili Catalucci, called “Ruccio”. As Mario Bernardo years later reports in his eulogy to Ettore Catalucci: “The small laboratory [...] had become, thanks to him, a large plant in step with the times, with over 260 employees and which handled 12 million

14 Tecnostampa, *Notification n. 29843*, 2 April 1926, document held by Chamber of Commerce, Rome.

15 For a brief history of the company, see: E. Jattarelli, *Quando la pellicola vive il suo momento ‘magico’. La storia del Cinema italiano passa attraverso le case di stampa*, “Cinema d’oggi”, 2(13), 1968, pp. 5-6.

16 On the topic, see at least: E. Sideri, *Coproducing Europe. An Ethnography of Film Markets, Creativity and Identity*, Berghahn, New York and Oxford 2023. Regarding Italian co-productions in the Sixties, see: F. Di Chiara, *Il fondo ‘Co’ dell’Archivio Centrale dello Stato. Alcune ipotesi per un’analisi del processo di implementazione della Legge Corona in materia di coproduzioni*, “L’Avventura. International Journal of Film and Media Landscapes”, 7(special issue), 2021, pp. 35-50.

17 Technochrome, *Notice to the Tribunal of Rome*, 22 December 1970, document held by Chamber of Commerce, Rome.

18 Technospes, *Ordinary meeting minutes*, 24 February 1972, document held by Chamber of Commerce, Rome.

19 See: E. Jattarelli, “Quando la pellicola vive il suo momento ‘magico’”, cit., pp. 5-6.

20 “L’Italia avrà il più grande stabilimento d’Europa per i film a colori”, *Araldo dello spettacolo*, 4(65), 1949, p. 4. On Finestauri’s life and work, see: F. Pierotti, *Elio Finestauri*, “Quaderni del CSCI”, 13, 2017, p. 243.

meters of film per year. [...]”.²¹ Then Bernardo provocatively closes his description of the plant in the golden years, suggesting that: “He could not fear anything from anyone”.²²

And yet, the situation at Spes in the 1960s was the same as at Tecnostampa: the “old guard” was looking for a replacement, and the crisis was bringing the company to its knees. It was therefore decided to create a newer and larger society, ideally capable of challenging the growing power of Technicolor and Luce. In the space of just one year, an agreement was reached, and, on October 2, 1972, Technospes was born.²³ The organisational chart included: Alberto Genesi as president, Catalucci as honorary president, Finestauri at the public relations, and “Ruccio” as the new technical director.

Infrastructure’s raw nerves: maintenance, safety, pollution

Although the operation had been advertised with considerable enthusiasm (Fig. 4), the situation of Technospes quickly became severe, even in the eyes of the management: “Many structural and organisational problems arose from the aforementioned concentration”.²⁴ The two circumstances that required immediate resolution were the unsustainable number of employees (more than 470 units) and the cohabitation of two plants of such magnitude. Again, the company minutes of Technospes make it clear that the administration’s goal was to reduce the number of workers within a few months.²⁵ However, the cuts were vigorously opposed by the labours, who staged a series of major strikes, such as the protests for the new workers’ contract of 1973, which not only significantly curtailed the projected cuts but also disrupted the scheduled activity.

The difficulties in cutting staff echoes those ones in reshaping the plants. Management intended to build a new, updated facility to replace the historic ones. It wasn’t only about maintenance costs; two other important factors were now taken into account when calculating the essential issues of Via Albalonga and Viale Campo Boario: safety norms and environmental requirements. The first was a long-standing pain in the neck for development and printing societies: because of the film industry’s bad reputation, as well as the levity with which numerous factories were extended in the postwar period, the relationship between the sector and the fire department was far from perfect. A precedent had been set by S.A.C.I., which in 1953 was denied authorisation to operate in its historic plant, putting it at risk of closure. Only a joint appeal by ANICA’s forces, with the personal involvement of Eitel Monaco, was able to resolve the problem.²⁶ To avoid such scenarios, Technospes

21 M. Bernardo, *Un vero pioniere del cinema italiano: Ettore Catalucci*, article found in the Finestauri family archive, p. 16.

22 *Ibidem*.

23 Technospes, *Extraordinary meeting minutes*, 2 October 1972 document held by Chamber of Commerce, Rome.

24 Technospes, *Ordinary meeting minutes*, 14 March 1974, document held by Chamber of Commerce, Rome.

25 Technospes, *Ordinary meeting minutes*, 31 July 1977, document held by Chamber of Commerce, Rome.

26 The little informations recovered on S.A.C.I.’s episode are kept in the “GSSS” folder, no. 1021 of the ANICA archive.

planned to construct a new centre that was in compliance with the law and located distant from high-density population districts. It was also for this reason that they chose a plot of land near Cinecittà: in addition to the obvious benefits of proximity to the studios, there was the possibility of carving out a new space for themselves in a more industrial location.

Environmental contamination was instead a comparatively new issue. It appears in a number of sources dating back to the early 1970s, when companies started to be concerned about the disposal of processed materials and produced toxins. In a 1974 article, in which UNITC President Alberto Sciarretta communicates the main problems of the category at the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the matter of pollution comes as one of the major issues, “for which many companies in the sector are in serious difficulty, unable to obtain provisions or even information from the competent Authorities”.²⁷

For all these reasons, the project for the new plant was urgent and critical. And yet, the works only started in 1976 and six years later the sole office quarters were accessible. Thanks to a detailed article in “Note di Tecnica cinematografica”, we know the project in detail: constructed next to the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, the new complex should have included five buildings (one for 35mm, one for 16mm and Super8, one for subtitling, one for the other services and the last one for offices and screening rooms) and be filled with state-of-the-art equipment (Fig. 5).²⁸

Making matters worse, the unexpected death of Ruccio Catalucci effectively compromised his family’s interest in the future of the company. Both Genesi and Catalucci did not find a generational change, and, in 1977, they passed the baton to Augusto Tifi, who had been part of the company since the beginning. The opening of the new plant arrived too late and five years later, on the pages of the *Corsera* we read: “Technospes [...] is closing its doors”.²⁹ The collapse became irreversible and, in 1985, the new Sole Director Lorenzo D’Ormea certifies the obligation to file for bankruptcy.³⁰

Conclusions

Looking at the swift end of Technospes and, therefore, of the two leading societies in the Italian film printing and development sector, is observing the crossroad of many historic dynamics that spread from the socio-cultural changes in habits and life-styles, to the techno-normative updating prompted by new media, as well as the financial-economic factors, both internal (a more ferocious competition) and external (international and intermedial competitors). Beneath these vast trajectories, the infrastructural dimension of a single society

²⁷ *Presa di posizione. Le industrie tecniche al Ministero dell’industria*, “Cinema d’oggi”, 7(7), 1973, p. 2.

²⁸ *Il nuovo stabilimento Technospes di via Tuscolana*, “Note di Tecnica cinematografica”, 15(47), 1976, p. 15.

²⁹ V. Ciuffa, *Technospes: 200 in cassa integrazione. Anche i gestori di sale in assemblea*, “Corriere della sera”, 16 July 1982, p. 13.

³⁰ Technospes, *Ordinary meeting minutes*, 30 October 1985, document held by Chamber of Commerce, Rome.

became a fertile soil in which to observe the specificity an operation (Technospes merger) and its resonance with its industrial transformations.

The proximity between media industry studies and infrastructuralism, as defined by John Durham Peters, has after all produced a growing number of contributors that tend to sensitise for a study of media that restores the ecological and connective elements of the medium reality.³¹ From the more media archaeological work of Jussi Parikka to the network analyses of Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski,³² the focus on less notable (even “boring”) elements has pointed out the historical relevance of adequately considering the raw materiality of a single plant, tube or street; at the point that David Hesmondhalgh goes so far as to speak of an “infrastructural turn”.³³ Moreover, reconnecting to Technospes’ history, it is important to underline that all these techno-environmental factors cannot just be dismissed as collateral or easy to fix, since they have their historical depth. They are endemic and persistent cracks, slithering under the industry’s skin during and even before the “glorious years” of Roman cinema, and, despite being called out in multiple occasion, they persisted until the 1970s crisis, when they emerged as momentous structural failures.

31 J. Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds. Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2016, pp. 30-38.

32 J. Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2015; L. Parks, N. Starosielski, *Signal Traffic. Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana et al., 2015.

33 D. Hesmondhalgh, *The Infrastructural Turn in Media and Internet Research*, in “The Routledge Companion to Media Industries”, cit., pp. 132–142.