CRESPI D’ADDA

UTOPIA OF WORK



Journal #12 presents *Crespi d’Adda. Utopia of Work*, a documentary by Alessandro Melazzini.

A Lombard utopia of life and work.

Crespi d’Adda is a workers’ village founded at the end of the 19th century, a timeless symbol of industrial utopia. This documentary is an invitation to explore the village as it is today, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since the 1990s.
The cotton mill closed long ago, yet here industrial and residential architecture merge into one, and the village still seems steeped in the paternalistic spirit of its founder.



CRESPI D’ADDA. UTOPIA OF WORK
Alessandro Melazzini
Germany, 2025, 26’

DIRECTOR’S NOTES

For Emil Cioran, every utopia is a ‘rose-tinted hell’. I agree, but there are hells and hells, utopias and utopias. Crespi d’Adda was certainly no workers’ paradise, yet if you consider the conditions factory workers faced at the end of the nineteenth century, there is no doubt that the owners’ self-interest went hand in hand with a certain social impulse.
This made for living and working conditions far better than those that prevailed beyond the walls of the Crespi village. It was an architectural and social reality that caught my interest straight away, from the moment it was first mentioned to me by my friend, the writer Walter Mariotti, a keen traveller through Italy’s architectural past.
With this work I have tried to tell the story of a place, an idea, a hope. Above all, of a symbol: that of an enlightened industrial capitalism – paternalistic and watchful, to be sure, but driven by the shrewd recognition that a company is nothing without the workers who make it up, and that granting them decent working conditions is not only humane but also astute. At least until we – first the workers, then the owners – are all, perhaps, replaced by artificial intelligence.

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY’S NOTES

The aim of the cinematography was to make the Crespi family’s utopia visible.
That is why we began from above: orthogonal, symmetrical framing heightened the sense of precision and geometry.
On the ground, the approach was different: still portraits of the architecture, as if time had stopped. We chose late summer, when nature is restrained and understated, neither intruding nor distracting. Every corner, every façade, captures a suspended present.
For the interviews, the outside experts are lit, composed, formal; the residents are immersed: handheld camera, spontaneity, lived experience.
And so, up close, the village reveals a different soul: not cold and still, but full of life.

Filippo Corbetta

IN CONVERSATION WITH THE DIRECTOR

How did the idea of telling the story of Crespi d’Adda come about?

I always try to tackle different subjects in my documentaries, as I don’t like being a vampire author who only ever feeds on the blood of one and the same theme. I also love making documentaries about subjects that interest me and that I want to explore in depth, as was the case with Crespi d’Adda. On top of that came the challenge of portraying architecture – photographically, a very different subject from those I had worked on before.

What did you want to bring out, beyond the architecture?

Talking about Crespi doesn’t just mean talking about architecture. It isn’t only a UNESCO World Heritage village, but also an industrial project, an idea conceived and carried out with determination and foresight, a symbol of Italian industriousness.

What was the hardest part, the biggest obstacle to overcome?

As always, above all, telling the story without boring the audience. Offering a portrayal that is inevitably partial, but, I hope, honest and certainly heartfelt. This time, being free of any broadcaster’s editorial brief, I chose a narrative that put the documentary’s protagonists centre stage, with no external voice-over. I’m pleased with that choice, because I think the storytelling benefited from it.

What would you have liked to film but couldn’t?

Had I had more time and more resources, I would have lingered much longer in this microcosm; above all, I would have liked to interview some of the elderly people who still live there. But the timescales set by the European funding call that enabled me to make the documentary, together with the limited number of shooting days available, meant I had to give that up. And then there is the regret that Rinaldo, a local resident I was fortunate enough to interview, sadly passed away before seeing the finished film.

How did you choose the voices in the documentary?

As always, through a mix of research and luck. Walter Mariotti was a given, since it was thanks to him that I discovered Crespi d’Adda. The architect Marco Claudi is a dear friend of mine who lived in a Milanese ‘company town’ he often told me about – not to mention that he devoted his degree dissertation to Crespi d’Adda itself. Alessandra Selmi is the author of a novel set in the industrial village, and Antonella Checchi is an architect and scholar of the subject. Giorgio Ravasio, president of the Crespi d’Adda association, was a stroke of luck. As a rule I try not to interview people who hold institutional positions, because there is a risk they will come across as stiff, but while preparing for the shoot I happened to read a piece by Giorgio – in which, incidentally, he quoted Cioran – and I realised immediately that he must be a fresh mind as well as an expert on the subject. He helped me with the production and I am very grateful to him for that.

ALESSANDRO MELAZZINI
Director

An Italian documentary filmmaker and naturalised German citizen, he lived in Munich for more than twenty years before recently moving to an Alpine village in Valtellina.
He was born in Sondrio and took degrees in political economy at Bocconi University in Milan and in philosophy at Heidelberg.
After working as a freelance writer, journalist and translator, he self-produced his first documentary and, in 2010, founded his own production company, Alpenway Media GmbH.
As a documentary director and/or producer, he works with RAI, ARD, ZDF and ARTE.
His films are remarkably eclectic, ranging from the life and exploits of Ilona Staller (Cicciolina. L’arte dello scandalo) to the world of Italo disco (Italo Disco. Il suono scintillante degli anni ’80), the art and spirituality of the Cistercians (L’eredità dei cistercensi in Italia) and the life and art of Italo Svevo (Italo Svevo. Scrivere nascosto a Trieste).
Documentaries produced by Alpenway regularly screen at international festivals.