

ARTICLES / SAGGI

ITALIAN CINEMA AND THE CONTESTED MEMORIES OF FASCISM: NOTES TOWARDS A HISTORICAL RECONSIDERATION

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Sommario

Questo articolo analizza la rappresentazione del periodo fascista nella cinematografia italiana e dimostra la necessità di una sua riconsiderazione in chiave storica. Il pezzo parte da recenti film cosiddetti revisionisti e li pone nel contesto dell'uso politico del film storico nell'Italia del dopoguerra. Interrogando i punti di contatto di rappresentazioni del ventennio di opposta matrice ideologica, e in particolare il comune debito verso il mito degli italiani brava gente, l'articolo sostiene la necessità di superare un dibattito incentrato sullo sterile dualismo tra ortodossia e revisionismo per raggiungere una più completa visione delle memorie del periodo fascista e della loro trasmissione attraverso il mezzo cinematografico.

Since 1945, a qualified consensus has existed around a specific version of Italy's fascist period, one which marginalised fascism and its popularity while simultaneously, and not without both reason and reasons, highlighting the role of the Resistance. As shown most recently by John Foot, that consensus is now gone, making way for a wider acknowledgment of the plurality of experiences connected to the period between 1922 and 1945 (Foot, 2009). On the one hand, this more complex understanding of Italy's past is a cause of some relief in

all those who wish to acknowledge and study the contested memories of that period; on the other hand, it is a cause of great dismay to those, often the same people, who look with concern at the tendency to award – out of political design, conformism or intellectual laziness – the same political and moral legitimacy to the experiences and choices of both sides, fascists and anti-fascists. At least since the emergence of the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (AN) as a government partner in 1994, the political arena has paid the commemoration and interpretation of World War II a degree of attention that probably surpasses any popular interest in the subject. Fascism and anti-fascism, their historical role and present incarnations, certainly played a part in the 1994 and 1996 elections, while until the new century AN's leader Gianfranco Fini has been at pains to distance his party from its extremist roots. Silvio Berlusconi himself has adopted a historiographically preposterous, but politically successful, long-term strategy, which places Italian fascism and Italian communism on the same level, while simultaneously presenting fascism as the ancient past and communism as an ever-present danger. In response, Italy's centre-left coalitions have, as in almost all other regards, chased Berlusconi's agenda; unable to celebrate and advocate the key role of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) first in the establishment, then in the consolidation and finally in the survival of democracy in the peninsula, the left, in its many incarnations, has instead stumbled along unsure between celebrating their own antifascist roots and rejecting all totalitarian ideologies.

In practical terms, this struggle has been fought on issues as wide-ranging as participation in official commemorations such as the 25 April demonstrations, the establishment of memorial days for the victims of the Holocaust and of the *foibe*¹, the selection of history textbooks in schools and the naming of city streets, among others

¹ The word *foibe* refers to fissures that occur naturally in the karstic terrain of the Carso region, spanning the border between Italy and Slovenia. The Italian word has become synonymous with the massacres of thousands of ethnic Italians shot and disposed of in the vertical caves by Marshal Tito's partisan brigades in the last months of World War II (Sluga, 2001).

(Clifford, 2008). Not the least of the national memory's battlegrounds has been popular culture and, in particular, cinema and television (Ferrero-Regis, 2009:116-136). Here, a number of historical films on World War II, part-funded by the state television RAI and intended for television broadcast over two evenings, appear to have led a concerted effort to rediscover marginalised experiences of the war, celebrate new Italian heroes and question the morality of the Resistance. These works have attracted little or no academic attention and often a dismissive critique in the Italian media, even when they have commanded wide television audiences. And yet the films themselves, their commissioning, broadcasting and reception, pose a number of questions which need answering. At the same time, they point towards the need to reconsider more widely the representation of fascism in Italian cinema and television.

This article sets out the rationale and the need for such reconsideration, aimed at placing contemporary filmmaking about World War II into the context of sixty-five years of political use of the historical film in Italy. Questioning the points of contact between opposing ideological representations of wartime Italy, it argues the need to move beyond the orthodox-revisionist debate and towards a fuller acknowledgment of the complexities of Italy's memories of the war and their transmission through film.

World War II as national trauma

As many scholars have shown, Italians have historically privileged a view of their fascist past which extolled Italian resistance to fascism – in fact a minoritarian and therefore even more praiseworthy experience – and caricatured a set of national characteristics that have become inextricably linked to the fascist period (Gundle, 2000; Pezzino, 2005). Although it has many incarnations and shades, this well-worn view can be summarised simplistically thus: Italians have always been selfish, in a Guicciardinian sense, both noble and perfidious; lazy, indifferent to politics, conformist to the point of cowardice, they were well suited to accepting the rule of a basically

paternalistic dictatorship whose totalitarian ambitions were subordinated, arguably deliberately, to a pragmatic cultivation of consensus which in many ways allowed Italy's familistic survivalism to continue unaltered. Slow to anger – the story continues – Italians finally reacted as Mussolini's regime turned inwardly and outwardly aggressive by sanctioning the alliance with Germany, issuing the racial laws and declaring war on France and Britain in 1940. Unaccustomed to any sense of civic responsibilities, the population was nevertheless steeped in communitarian values fostered by Latin solidarity, an atavistic parochialism and deeply felt Christian values, and thus reacted against the senseless bloodshed. As it is often summed up: *italiani brava gente*.

While there may be some truth to this stereotype, it was nevertheless the result of abundant simplification and often wilful disregard of key aspects of the fascist period, such as the level of popular support for the conflict in Ethiopia. Fostered by both popular and institutional reconstructions, this version of events proved both successful and useful: it helped Italy recover its national pride and negotiate a more generous settlement in the post-war world order; its implications were the underestimation of fascism and the restoration of national innocence by pitching Italy as a victim first of an unpopular dictatorship, and then of a cruel German occupation. By extension, the restoration and exaltation of Italy's antifascist credentials acquitted the State from its worst crimes, in Ethiopia and other occupied territories, or at home against Jews and ethnic minorities. The pragmatic advantages of such a narrative were reason enough for its success and enduring legacy. Yet its form was arguably as important as its content: this was, most of all, a seductive narrative, at home and abroad, because it was a life-affirming tragedy and drew a picture of a warm-hearted and peace-loving people.

As my own research on Italian Holocaust films and their reception has shown, popular culture contributed to severing the link between the Italian persecution of its Jewry and the post-1943 deportation at the hands of the German occupying forces (Lichtner, 2008). This separation occurred as early as the end of the war, and was centred on

a twofold strategy: first, downplaying the application of the 1938 racial laws and stressing the difference between Italy's treatment of its Jewish population and Germany's; second, noting the relatively lower percentage of Italian Jews murdered compared to that in other occupied countries. While the partiality of this reconstruction has now been exposed, its popular appeal, at home and abroad, was both significant and long-lived. An excellent example of its pervasiveness is provided by an interview Vittorio de Sica gave to a French journalist at the release of his 1970 adaptation of Giorgio Bassani's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962): while his film was amongst the very few both to dwell on home-grown anti-Semitism and to acknowledge Italian involvement in the deportation of Jews, the director summarily denied any history of anti-Semitism in Italy, seemingly confirming what the French journalist already believed (Volmane, 1971). The contradiction between the film's powerful indictment of Italy's role in the persecution of the Jews and the general dismissal of this aspect of the film, not only by the press but even by the film's director, proved that Italy's self-acquittal had been so persuasive that persecution and protection had ceased to be incompatible. What *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* showed, amongst other things, was that the Holocaust in Italy had been a trauma of a minority, and that fascism and the world war had been national traumas to be treated with extreme sensitivity, if not ignored or actually repressed. The national post-war narrative has therefore been constructed on a series of binaries: an 'institutional' Italy and a 'real' one; a pre-1943 Italy and a post-1943 one; a pre-1938 fascism and a post-1938 one. Yet perhaps the most painful and sensitive internal dichotomy, the one between fascist and antifascist Italians, would take decades to be acknowledged in full.

The revisionist trend

One of the key cultural traits of Italy's so-called Second Republic has been historical revisionism. In particular, the early years of Silvio Berlusconi's rise to power were accompanied by fierce political

propaganda which masterfully combined elements of liberal, Catholic and neo-fascist anti-Communism. Berlusconi rode Reaganite rhetoric over the triumph of liberalism, exploited decades of Catholic scare-mongering and harnessed the desire for revenge and recognition of a newly-legitimate neo-fascist right. It was the revenge of those who had been at the margins of the political discourse in post-war Italy, crushed by the presumed cultural and moral supremacy of the left: wheeling out now Fukuyama's 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1993), now Courtois' compendium of nasty reds (Courtois, 1999), Berlusconi's political strategy was to revise the central role of anti-fascism in the Italian Republic and the central role of Italian Communism in the anti-fascist effort. In this endeavour, Italy's right found the unfailing aid of a left gripped in relentless introspection, a search for identity and modernity which often amounted to little more than self-flagellation, failing either to reclaim a dignified past or build a significant present, while relinquishing political initiative and authority along the way.

Perhaps the chief event to recall in this context is Luciano Violante's inauguration speech as speaker of the Chamber of Deputies on 10 May 1996 (Violante, 1996). His centre-left coalition had just won its first general election in convincing fashion and former communist politicians had been sworn in as ministers of internal affairs and justice, shattering once and for all the *convention ad excludendum* against the PCI that had characterised Italy since 1947. Perhaps inspired by the climate of intense expectation, Violante asked the nation to interrogate itself about the reasons that fifty years earlier had led thousands of young Italians, after Italy's collapse and the armistice of 8 September 1943, to fight for the Republic of Salò (hence the name *repubblichini*), even when its cause was clearly doomed. While cautioning against conducting a wholesale revision of history or attributing moral equivalence to both sides, Violante called for an acknowledgment of those Italians as necessary to achieve a national reconciliation that had been prevented by the refusal to consider the war of liberation a civil war (Violante, 1996). A noble speech, it placed a new item on a political and cultural agenda of

which the left would almost immediately lose control. Thus the ultimate result of this introspection was not demystification and reconciliation, but rather the very mix of revisionism, slander and political apathy that *Violante* had wished to avoid.

In this new cultural ferment, the first film to interpret the broader trend of historical reconsideration was Renzo Martinelli's *Porzûs* (1997). *Porzûs* recounts the events surrounding the brutal murder of twenty non-Communist partisans of the Osoppo brigade at the hands of communist Resistance fighters in the Friuli². The massacre of *Porzûs* needs to be understood in the context of the last months of the war in the north-east of Italy, where the civil war between fascists and anti-fascists was at its fiercest and where intra-Resistance tensions between communists and non-communist factions were exacerbated by the aggressive proximity of Tito's Yugoslav forces. Given the intense confusion over the post-war fate of Trieste and the breakdown of relations between the Western Allies and the USSR, the massacre belongs as much to the realm of post-war politics as to that of the Italian war of liberation. On the one hand, the communists suspected the Catholic partisans of conspiring with the fascists against them; on the other hand, the Catholic partisans suspected the communists of plotting with Tito for a Yugoslav annexation of Trieste (Moder, 1997).

In the minimal space that gloss and gore leave to analysis, Martinelli's film is reasonably thorough in setting out these historical elements. And although his position is unmistakably anti-Communist – in particular by forcing the issue of the PCI's responsibility in the massacre – what is most interesting in the context of this article is not the manipulative aspects of the filmic text as much as the reception it was accorded. As Martinelli himself protested in 2007, RAI bought the distribution rights to the film only to refuse either to screen it on television or to distribute it for the home video market, which it has only recently reached (Martinelli, 2007). Much as in the case of

² The Osoppo formation, founded by local clergy in an effort to challenge Communist hegemony in the local resistance movement, included Catholic partisans, members of Ferruccio Parri's social-democratic Partito d'Azione (Action Party) and monarchists (Fertilio, 1997).

Marcel Ophuls's *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*, 1971) in its ten year wait for a French television broadcast – between 1971 and 1981 – *Porzûs* appears to be the subject of a 'censorship by inertia' (Ophuls, 1971). RAI's decision is inexplicable for a number of reasons: first, the film had succeeded in generating interest in the subject, including a one-page spread in the historic Communist Party daily newspaper *L'Unità*; second, even given the well-known politicisation of RAI, there have been sufficient changes in administration – of both RAI and the country – to exclude a party-political boycott; third, this can hardly be a conspiracy of silence to prevent knowledge of the *Porzûs* massacre, because the event has been well-known for decades and indeed the subject of several trials since 1952, which convicted the communist partisans' leader Mario Toffanin³. Rather, *Porzûs* might just be the least revisionist and the most partial of the 'revisionist' films of the last fifteen years. In other words, RAI, which traditionally has strived to achieve a compromise between majority and opposition, may struggle with the film's militant but honest choice of subject. Instead, it appears to prefer films that adopt a seemingly more balanced political approach aimed at erasing the differences between the sides: a heart-warming but deadly embrace which is arguably much more misleading than outright propaganda.

A chance to broadcast *Porzûs* came in 2005 when RAI prepared its programme to observe the first day of remembrance for the victims of the *foibe*. Strongly advocated by AN which had inherited the championing of this issue from the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the Memorial Day was sanctioned by the Berlusconi government in 2004 to commemorate those Italians who had been expelled from Yugoslavia and massacred by Tito's partisans in the immediate aftermath of World War II. RAI commissioned for the occasion a new TV-movie, *Il cuore nel pozzo*, directed by Alberto Negrin. Negrin had already directed *Perlasca: un eroe italiano*, in 2001, demonstrating

³ Toffanin's sentence was later commuted to ten years in prison, which he never carried out having previously absconded to Yugoslavia.

not only confidence with the television-movie format and an appropriate command of the historical genre but also a fine and all-Italian political sensitivity, based on privileging the personal over the political and emotion and melodrama over ideology. Perlasca, in particular, was an ideal hero for Second Republic Italy: he was conservative and bourgeois, better still an official of the state, close to the fascist party during the regime and to the MSI later, but also a hero of untarnished credentials. Perlasca thus suited everyone, carrying the patriotic and political qualities in favour with the right but also the anti-fascist virtues inextricably linked with opposing the Holocaust. Moreover, his story allowed Italians once again to confront their role in the Holocaust from a partial and reassuring perspective where German brutality represented a familiar counterpoint.

There was infinitely more potential for political debate in *Il cuore nel pozzo*. The film's very subject matter was intensely political and controversial: Italy's historical unwillingness to address it since 1945, had made the ethnic cleansing of Italians in Yugoslavia into a stalwart of the extreme right and now the right fully expected to gain political capital from its acknowledgment. The unease surrounding the *foibe* in post-war Italy amounted to more than just the PCI's embarrassment in acknowledging the war crimes of their Yugoslav comrades and its own silence, at the time and later; for successive Italian governments, addressing the *foibe* would have meant dealing with the reasons for the presence of Italian civilians and military personnel in Yugoslavia in the first place, that is acknowledging Italian expansionism in the area, fascist ethnic policies in the north-east of Italy and in the occupied territories, and the brutality of Italian occupying troops, especially in anti-partisan warfare. These are exactly the elements that are lost in Negrin's maudlin melodrama, which follows a child who witnesses the murder of his parents and is led to safety by a demobilised soldier and a priest. Whereas the quintessentially conservative characters were clearly chosen to maximise appeal with television audiences and please the authorities, the film stopped short of explicitly stressing the link between Yugoslav and Italian communists, thus angering the right, including Martinelli, who called

it a 'missed opportunity' (Martinelli, 2007). On the contrary, the film offered viewers a picture of anti-Italian persecution in isolation, rather than in the context of war, occupation and racial politics both in Italy and the Balkans.

Nevertheless, the film suited its political sponsors: Maurizio Gasparri, AN deputy and Minister of Telecommunications in 2005, rose to the occasion, electing himself producer, critic and historian, and adopting a remarkable postmodernist approach in infusing the text with the required meanings. Trampling over protocol, which accords RAI at least the illusion of political autonomy, Gasparri issued invitations in his name to a RAI premiere of the film, to be hosted in the same Roman venue where AN were celebrating their tenth anniversary with some pomp. Then, faced with a loyal audience of comrades and the film's embarrassed cast and crew, Gasparri regaled them with an impromptu stinging attack on historians guilty of downplaying the *foibe* (Fusani, 2005; Messina, 2005).

Ousted from government in 2006, Gasparri was back in place, as co-ordinator of the Senators of Berlusconi's new Popolo della Libertà party (PDL), two years later to oversee the launch of yet another revisionist fiction film. Michele Soavi's *Il sangue dei vinti*, the partly RAI-funded adaptation of Gianpaolo Pansa's controversial book on the *repubblichini*, was first submitted unsuccessfully to the Venice Film Festival, and then eventually shown, but only outside of the main competition, at Rome's Festa del Cinema, before being briefly distributed in cinemas and then broadcast on television in May 2009. The film, a rather odd hybrid of melodrama, political exposé and murder-mystery, follows a policeman obsessed with solving the murder of a prostitute in Rome while his own family is torn apart by the civil war as his sister joins the *repubblichini* and his brother the Resistance. Atrocities and political fervour on both sides are resolved when the fascist girl rescues a partisan woman and her daughter from the Germans: a scene which appears to exist only to qualify the morality of the fascist character, while simultaneously reminding the spectator that, nasty as the civil war was, neither side could be as bad as the Germans. The novelty in Soavi's film, in the context of how

Italian cinema has traditionally represented World War II, might be that the Allied bombardments are shown not as the price of liberation but as the scars of occupation, in a sense equivalent to German atrocities. Indeed, the girl's decision to join the *repubblichini* is brought about by her husband's death in the San Lorenzo bombings in Rome, and not by fascist fervour or patriotic outrage at Italy's capitulation. This is a significant point, because it can either be interpreted as a wholesale reassessment of the *repubblichini* motivation – they were not fascist after all – or as a scruple stopping the filmmakers from adopting a truly fascist heroine. Either way, *Il sangue dei vinti*'s 'balanced' approach seems to have left everyone unhappy: Pansa found the film's adaptation of his book too loose; even Gasparri lamented its soft touch; the left criticised its refusal to draw a moral distinction between fascists and anti-fascists, or link anti-fascist violence against the *repubblichini* to two decades of oppression (Conti, 2008).

Il sangue dei vinti is an apt example of the politicised confusion of the last fifteen years. The simultaneous collapse of the Cold War system of power internationally and the DC-PCI dualism in Italy brought about an understandable and in many ways necessary reconsideration of the events that led to the birth of Italy's Republic. Yet this revision has been both partial and flawed: it has often descended into party-political point scoring and at the same time it has sought a compromising synthesis that does not suit historical analysis. In this process film has played its part and, interestingly, television, the most politicised of the visual mass media, and RAI – the most politically involved of the broadcasters in spite of Berlusconi's ownership of Mediaset – has been the chosen battleground. The boundaries of what is representable have certainly shifted, yet arguably the political use of cinema and some of the representational tropes applied to that era have stayed much the same.

Cinema and the representation of World War II in historical context

The role of film, through cinema and later television, in the construction and dissemination of Italy's wartime dates back to the war itself. In the immediate aftermath of the war, film contributed to reinforce a reassuring vision of Italianness, a vision that has been political in all its nuances. Many neo-realist films responded to the euphoria of the anti-fascist Resistance and the challenges of its post-war evolution by offering a unifying narrative, which necessarily depended on the downplaying both of the fascist regime's popularity and of its seriousness. Hence, the greater part of the neo-realist films that dealt with the war adopted a set of narrative strategies which success turned into nothing short of a five-part doctrine. First, a concentration on the period after 8 September 1943, and specifically on the last months of the war; second, the representation of Italian fascists as figures of ridicule; third, the use of this image as a counterpoint to one of Germans as monsters; fourth, the overestimation of popular support for the Resistance to the point of assuming it; and fifth, the heavy symbolic use of children, either in central or supporting roles, in order to define the actions of adults and reinforce all of the above points, as well as to provide a degree of hope and an uplifting ending.

Roma città aperta (1945) is the most obvious and arguably the most accomplished example of the trends outlined above. Set in the months before the liberation of Rome, when Nazi-fascist occupation was at its most repressive and most pointless, Rossellini's film portrayed the Germans as brutal, ruthless, and also as immoral, for example using homosexuality to characterise negatively both main German characters. Their Italian allies, on the contrary, came from a social undergrowth of misfits, opportunists, greedy and cowardly men, and shallow, lost women. The men were ugly, excessively tall, short or fat, branded with misshapen features and unpleasant voices. The Roman population, with hardly any exception, formed a wholesome counterpoint made of atavistic humanism, Catholic values expressed

not through piety but through action and old-fashioned, working-class common sense. Their children were their conscience: brave, reckless and above all innocent, their presence provides salvation and their actions the redemption of a nation. There was little sign of the crowds that had cheered Mussolini and thrived or survived by his government's long rule.

Yet *Roma città aperta* is also arguably the best example of that magnificent urgency which allowed early neo-realism to accompany a somewhat sanitised version of the immediate past with a contagious spontaneity, hope matched by expectation, spurring people to action, demanding social justice, providing the synthesis of resistance and revolution. In those dramatic years, it was perhaps necessary for the nation's self-representation to be more inspiring than realistic, and in that representation we should see not only a collective self-acquittal but also a significant contribution to the psychological and moral reconstruction of the nation.

Both the urgency and the hope had gone by 1959, when two films, Mario Monicelli's *La grande guerra* and Roberto Rossellini's *Il Generale della Rovere*, won *ex-aequo* the Venice Film Festival, heralding a new wave of films that attempted to reclaim the subject matters and the aesthetic values of neo-realism. Forty-two films about World War II were made between 1959 and 1962. Unlike the films of the immediate post-war period, these enjoyed reasonable success but had little to offer, for the most part, both aesthetically and politically. While generally retaining the glorification of the anti-fascist struggle that was typical of neorealism, films of this era were sufficiently removed from the event to offer audiences a cosier and more inclusive anti-fascism, using comedic tropes more readily than neorealist films had done, and for the most part shunning tragedy.

The choice of leading characters best epitomises the difference between neo-realist films and their rather faded relations of the early 1960s. In the late 1940s these had been communist intellectuals, priests and working class women and men in whom the qualities of the previous two categories often found something of a synthesis. Between 1959 and 1962, instead, Italian war films focused on lower

middle class leading characters with no political and ideological affiliation or, as in the case of Luciano Salce's *Il Federale* (1962), allegiances so heavily caricatured as to be pathetic and ultimately void of significance. Clueless fascists and accidental anti-fascists: this was wartime politics at the time of the economic miracle, aimed not at introspection and even partial re-elaboration, but at a numbing and undemanding entertainment. Yet, even so, these films were more worthy of critical attention than its contemporaries felt: in particular, their political and ideological ambiguity deserved attention, as their apparent apathy was not always real and was in any case always political. Critic Lino Miccichè dismissed *Il Federale* as "a chapter amongst the most degraded of the comical branch of films on fascism, where an abundance of mockeries evenly and generously distributed result in a sort of victimistic brotherhood of *Italiani brava gente*, whether wearing a black shirt or a bourgeois' suit and tie" (Miccichè, 1995). Yet Salce's film epitomises a sort of engagé apathy, its *qualunquismo*⁴, lamented by Miccichè, clearly hid a number of thoughtful political insights, such as in the very final scene when the fascist character, having been saved from a lynch mob and made a seamless transition from fascist to bourgeois uniform, throws away in disgust the cigarettes offered him by American soldiers. Here, then, is a political statement both on the broken promises of the past and on the hollow rewards of the present which calls for a wider political reconsideration of all these works, even if their distant relationship with the neorealist model makes them seem shallow and often mediocre.

What neither early nor late neo-realism had carried out was a proper investigation into the origins and popularity of fascism. This was a subject that undoubtedly existed in private memory, but could not be reconciled with the public demand to move on from the war.

⁴ The word *qualunquismo* derives from the right-wing political formation L'Uomo Qualunque (the ordinary man), which in the first Republican elections of 1948 sought to interpret the legacy of fascism, providing political representation to all those whose nostalgia could no longer be expressed in the public arena. The word has since expressed, better than any translation, a critical disinterest in politics comprising populist and anti-democratic elements.

Thus a critical gaze at pre-war fascist Italy was only attempted after 1968, as part of the broader generational challenge of almost every aspect of Italy's society and culture. The *sessantottini* were just as keen to question their parents' past as their counterparts in France and West Germany, and fascism was the previous generation's original sin. However, while the narratives constructed by the protesters rejected much of their parents' interpretation of the past, the Italians did salvage the experience of the Resistance, which they incorporated into their political identity just as many of their parents had done after the war, whether they had participated in it or not. Thus, unlike in France, the spotlight on the wartime past, merciless though it often was, failed, in particular, to dismiss permanently the central myth of *italiani brava gente*.

The challenge was nevertheless significant, the critique often fierce and the analysis sharp. In Italy, this was the era of political filmmakers and many turned their gaze directly or indirectly towards the fascist period, its origins and legacy. Amongst these, Bertolucci's trilogy on fascism, *Strategia del ragno* (1970), *Il Conformista* (1970), and *1900* (1974), best demonstrates the insights and arguments of the period, as well as some of the key concerns and tropes used to re-represent a recent past that many in Italy had already begun to consider ancient. Bertolucci's films shared with others, such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, o le 120 Giornate di Sodoma* or Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*, an interest in the psychological roots and consequences of totalitarian regimes, which was the staple diet of 1970s intellectuals. But Bertolucci matched his fascination with psychoanalysis with an interest in the practice of politics, both of the *ventennio* and of post-war Italy, including the delicate issue of memory, and amnesia, of the past. Memorable scenes such as the Church marriage of black shirts and bourgeois interests in *1900*, or Clerici's cleansing in a rejoicing nationalist-communist crowd in *Il Conformista*, encapsulated that priceless cinematic ability to comment simultaneously on the past and the present – and the relationship between the two.

Returning then to where we started, to contemporary films about fascism, it seems evident even from such a brief and partial overview,

that Italian cinema has intervened in political and historical debates around fascism and World War II ever since 1945, all the while contributing to form popular attitudes towards the past, by providing both dominant narratives and counter-narratives. This point, though hardly groundbreaking, needs nevertheless to be made if we are to guard against the offhand dismissal of the more recent films as revisionist drivel and argue for their rigorous academic consideration within the context of cinema's intervention in the public historical discourse. Given the natural fluctuations of commercial and cultural trends, this intervention has remained a constant, even though its form and content have changed radically.

(Partial) truths and reconciliation

Perhaps the crucial question here is in fact how much the content has changed or, more specifically, which parts of the content have changed, focussing on a qualitative, rather than quantitative analysis of this change. As discussed earlier, new stories are being told, some subjects have gained public legitimacy which had before been relegated to the private sphere and some previously ignored perspectives have been reclaimed, although it remains to be established quite how these new stories relate to the 'voiceless' they claim to give voice to, whether they achieve this or not, and how much instead the voiceless are used here simply to increase the volume of contemporary political debates. This aside, if it is clear that contemporary films represent a deep reassessment of the fascist period it is also evident that this reassessment is partial.

As the purpose of this article is not to answer these questions, but rather to outline them and to argue the need both to raise and answer them exhaustively, it will suffice here to point out a few key aspects of the representation of fascism and World War II which appear little changed. First, contemporary so-called 'revisionist' films still ignore pre-war fascism, focusing mostly on the war. This belies any claim that these films answer a contemporary right-wing desire to revisit fascism, although it does not necessarily mean that such an attempt is

not taking place more subtly and through other media. In fact, the fascist government's choice to ally itself with Hitler and enter World War II remains widely seen as the beginning of its decline in popularity and as its worst mistake. From a neo-fascist political perspective, focussing on pre-war fascism would create space for an assertion of its popularity and, with an amount of imagination and manipulation by no means unusual in films, allow the celebration of its ambitions and few successes. Why would those inclined to reclaim Mussolini's statesmanship, as we all too often hear is now the case, concentrate on his demise?

But of course narrating wartime stories does not mean analysing critically, or even dispassionately, Italy's decision to enter the war, let alone its conduct in it. In fact, much as Italian films on this subject have always done, the 'revisionist films' focus exclusively on the period after September 1943: indeed, *Porzûs*, *Un cuore nel pozzo* and *Il sangue dei vinti* are all set during the last few months of the war. In other words there is no sign here of Italy's war: the attack on France in 1940; the botched invasion of Greece; the disastrous deserts of North Africa; the Russian debacle. Or rather, the signs are selective: of Greece we might see the post-armistice German massacre of Italian soldiers in Cephalonia; of the African campaigns, by far the most represented aspect is the defeat at El Alamein; of the invasion of the USSR, the names of the missing, or at best exhausted, veterans⁵; of the Balkan occupation we now see the tame and tragic end; and while the persecution of Italy's Jews is ever-present, it took cinema until 1970 to mention the 1938 Racial Laws, which sanctioned institutional anti-Semitism and the persecution of Italy's Jews. Hence, historically Italian cinema has ignored Italy's role in oppressing foreign populations and domestic minorities, while it has offered and still

⁵ See for example Gabriele Salvatores's *Mediterraneo* (1991), *I giorni dell'amore e dell'odio* (Claver Salizzato, 2001) and RAI's 2005 historical fiction film *Cefalonia* (Riccardo Milani) for Greece; *El Alamein: la linea del fuoco* (Enzo Monteleone, 2002) and *Le rose del deserto* (Mario Monicelli, 2006) as far as Africa is concerned; on the Russian campaign see Giuseppe de Santis's 1962 *Italiani brava gente* and reference to missing veterans in, for example, *Pasqualino Settebellezze* (Lina Wertmuller, 1974) and *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988).

offers plenty of examples of Italian victimisation. All of these narrative strategies seem to point to an overall design, to represent Italy as victim rather than aggressor, which is consistent with the self-portrait Italians have seen on screen since 1945.

Not only, then, have Italian films always commented on history and used history for contemporary political purposes, but the latest films associated with the resurgence of a right-wing history present a number of narrative and representational tropes which are consonant with traditional representations of fascism and WWII. While in some ways undoubtedly antithetic to more orthodox, resistance-centred narratives, the films of the 21st century share a common denominator with many earlier examples: the myth of *italiani brava gente*. In academic circles it is now a given that the stereotype of the good Italian is indeed just a myth, even if its health seems to be steady with public opinion. In 1971, when *The Sorrow and the Pity* was first released, shattering the Gaullist orthodoxy of 40-million *résistants*, Simone Veil lamented the replacement of one myth with another one, of 40-million collaborators (*Le Monde*, 1981)⁶. It is not my intention here to contribute to a similar operation. This paper is not concerned with the accuracy, or the degree of accuracy, of these myths, but rather with how their longevity affects the representation of history and the political discourses constructed around it. In the first instance, persisting in representing Italians as unfailingly decent prevents any honest analysis of the past. This is an aspect that should interest the right as much as the left of the political arena: the left should trust that such an analysis would reveal the righteousness of anti-fascism in all its forms, if not in each of its actions; the right should strive for such an analysis so as to strip the civil war of its mythology and thus reclaim the legitimacy not of those who were defeated, but of those who were wrong. How can one revise history without first freeing any representation from the need to show all Italians as people fundamentally alien to evil?

⁶ Simone Veil, interviewed by Europe1 radio station; reported in *Le Monde*, 30 October 1981.

The makers of *Porzûs, Il sangue dei vinti* and their contemporaries could, therefore, simply be incompetent revisionists. Or they could be partial revisionists: not only because they revisit only parts of the history of those years, nor only because their revisionism is close to and openly sponsored by one political side, but also because historical revisionism is only a part of their purpose. There are in fact other consequences of the *italiani brava gente* myth as espoused in recent years. On the one hand, there is the unconditional and unstained version of the myth, such as in *Il cuore nel pozzo*, that represents an unflinchingly moral and victimised population. This stereotype is uplifting and anaesthetic, perfect for an evening in front of the television, subtly putting across certain political points – communist crimes, patriotic suffering – without otherwise causing any serious or potentially destabilising political consideration. On the other hand, there is the dark and ambiguous, would-be edgier version of the same myth, such as the one *Il sangue dei vinti* seems to offer, that accompanies good with evil, more or less evenly distributed, and thus suggests that everyone is the same. While the same topics dear to the right are raised here too, often less subtly, this only apparently more honest version of the stereotype reinforces and historicises contemporary apathy towards politics, feeding a disillusionment which is the antithesis of democracy. Not thinking about politics or thinking all political sides are the same, effectively obtains the same result: to prevent analysis and maintain the status quo. The danger in these films, therefore, might not be the re-writing of history but its erasure, a political operation which translates present indifference towards politics into the past, effectively replacing any political or moral rationale with the illogical logic of reality television. From the blurring of differences and the decontextualisation of the past, only one side stands to gain.

The fact that *Porzûs*, the least conciliatory of the ‘revisionist’ films, lay dormant in a RAI archive for many years may well be a case in point, although undoubtedly these considerations need further investigation and more solid proof. Indeed their aim is, at least in part, to argue for such a need. By way of opening up the debate on the

representation and popular perceptions of fascist Italy, this article has attempted to prove that the orthodox-revisionist debate has little to offer. It is a fatally flawed defence mechanism: its roots are deluded, its premise simplistic and its results counter-productive. First of all, if the 'revisionist' films really are part of a wider right-wing campaign to rewrite history and deprive the left of its anti-fascist roots, all the while harming both the roots and the branches, then simply to dismiss these films is likely to be as successful a strategy as the opposition's withdrawal from the Chamber of Deputies in the aftermath of the 1924 Matteotti murder⁷: soon the revisionist will be the orthodox and the orthodox popular only in France. Secondly, this dismissal refuses to acknowledge that some revision may indeed be necessary and, at the same time, to realise that these films do not actually revise that much. Moving from this basic misunderstanding, the consequent analysis of these films and their aims will lead to an inappropriate response. Third, exclusively to dismiss or ridicule films that command good audience response runs the risk of lending support to the chief premise of the revisionist camp: that the history of the war was hijacked by the winners and that political, academic and cultural guardians of that history have ever since protected it at the expense of all alternative voices.

There are instead far more significant questions that contemporary revisionism begs us to ask and that only a serious and detached consideration of the phenomenon can help us answer. One question is undoubtedly about the politics of the memory of the civil war. 'The right', even as I have been hurriedly referring to it throughout this article, is a rather broad and complex church, perhaps especially in Italy and even more so since the formation, in 2008, of the PDL, which merged Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the post-fascist AN, thus

⁷ The fascist murder of Socialist MP Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 signalled a shift in the fascist control of Italy's government. In January 1925 Mussolini defiantly spoke to Parliament accepting political responsibility for the crime, but his leadership was not challenged paving the way for twenty years of fascist dictatorship.

including both fascist apologists and liberals with anti-fascist roots⁸. It would therefore be simplistic to presume that a political party is behind the revision of the history of the Civil War. Indeed, Maurizio Gasparri sponsored both *Il cuore nel pozzo* and *Il sangue dei vinti*: the latter displeased him but it was still broadcast. Moreover, it is not clear whether this political patronage was limited to the films' marketing or extended to their programming and production in the same way that appears to have characterised *Barbarossa* (2010), RAI's epic rendition of Alberto da Giussano sponsored by the Lega Nord and solicited directly on their behalf by Prime Minister Berlusconi in a now infamous phone-call with Rai Fiction director Agostino Saccà (Lillo, 2007). And why is *Porzûs* still not shown on TV? At play here there are undoubtedly some considerations that are historical in nature, namely the post-fascists attempting to settle old scores and substantiate an identitarian equality, and others that are presentist, such as the attempt to reiterate an anti-communist rhetoric that is ever-successful albeit orphaned of the Soviet scarecrow (or indeed of actual communists). These aims are akin and yet a tension must exist between them, as the latter only needs to discredit the communists without necessarily tarnishing the role of the Resistance or indeed re-evaluating the other side. The assessment of this tension, and with it the complexities of the memories of the Civil War, must pass through an acknowledgment of the plurality of these memories, and of their evolution, even within the anti-fascist orthodoxy.

The second key question must be about the meanings that reconciliation takes on in this specific Italian context. It is interesting to see Soavi refer to *Il sangue dei vinti* as an attempt to reconcile the two sides (Stefanutto Rosa, 2009). Was the 'civic religion of the Resistance' not also a way in part to heal wounds, or at least to prevent them from reopening (Gundle, 2000:113)? Ignoring the fascists' point of view, playing down their numbers and their brutality

⁸ Indeed, at the time of writing Berlusconi has expelled Gianfranco Fini's AN veterans: while the 'post-fascist' latter goes to any length to condemn Mussolini's ideology, the allegedly liberal former liberally quotes the old dictator.

was also a way of allowing their quiet reintroduction into the social fabric without interfering with private memories, as demonstrated by their rapid and assured resurfacing. That was a reconciliation based on silences; could contemporary revisionism really be an attempt to heal a fractious past by shattering the silence and thus according the defeated the dignity denied them? Soavi's words notwithstanding, this revision is itself too fractious to be a believable attempt at reconciliation, let alone bring it about. There is too little truth in this catharsis, too little assumption of responsibility. If it is an attempt to reconcile adversaries, it is one based on the erasure of all differences between them. It is flawed and if it is not utterly doomed to failure it is only because too few remain to remind us of those differences.

Conclusion

The task set here is ambitious but its accomplishment will help us redefine the relationship between Italian cinema and perhaps the most traumatic aspect of the country's history. One aspect of this relationship concerns the popular perceptions of history: how does film act both as site of memory (Nora, 1984-1992) for those who experienced the events in question and as a site for the construction of memory for those who require one. The other aspect is more strictly presentist, and concerns the political use of history: how does a specific representation of history interact with and influence the public's response to the political context of their time? These questions reflect what I have elsewhere described as the double historicity of film, that is its ability to comment on both the period a film represents and the period in which it was made, and thus also on how the latter interacts with the former (Lichtner:9-11).

The successful answer to these questions depends on three fundamental processes: first, an examination that is historical, that is not centred only on key films but on broader representational trends, highlighting those aspects of representation that have changed over time alongside those that have remained constant; second, an approach that is both text-based and audience-based, carrying out simultaneous

analyses of films and of their reception; third, the thorough contextualisation of both the film and its reception within the politics and general climate of the time of the film's release. The reward is an insight into how film both reflects and affects how Italians have related to their country's fascist past and the fratricidal conflict in which it culminated, how their relationship with the anti-fascist values of post-war Italy has evolved and their significance today.

While it has criticised the effectiveness of the unconditional defence of an orthodox, Resistance-centric historical narrative against revisionist attempts, what this article has not advocated is a relativist comparison of opposing representative trends or the search for an unhappy medium between them. Rather, it has made a case for a *longue-durée* reconsideration of how Italian cinema has represented fascism and World War II in Italy, arguing that such a reassessment will add to our understanding of the contested memories of this period and of the narratives employed to remember it. This reassessment must take into account not only the exploitative and selective revisionism of recent years, but also the silences, the simplifications both deliberate and accidental, and the distortions of Italy's history on which post-war Italy's pacification has been constructed. If it indeed achieves this, it will not be a reassessment, as I have called it, but an assessment, because an analysis of such scope has not yet been carried out.

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