

Italian Cinema and the Fascist Past: Tracing Memory Amnesia

Giacomo Lichtner

School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Giacomo.lichtner@vuw.ac.nz

Abstract

In Italy, cinema has contributed to constructing a paradox of memory in which the rememberer is asked to prevent past mistakes from happening again and yet is encouraged to forget what those mistakes were, or that they ever even took place. Through an examination of the long-term trends in Italian cinema about the Fascist period, this article explores its recurrent tropes alongside its recurrent absences, isolating in particular the act of killing and Italy's African Empire as crucial absences in Italy's memory. The dominant narrative of *italiani brava gente* explains popular amnesia and institutional silences that still surround the darkest and bloodiest pages in Italy's history. From the narratives of innocence and sacrifice that populate the canon of Italian film about Fascism to the sanitised representations of Italy's wars of aggression or the boycott of Moustapha Akkad's *The Lion of the Desert* (1981), this paper argues that recurrent presences and absences in Italy's cinematic memories of the long Second World War have not been random but coherent, cogent and consistent.

Keywords

Italy – cinema – Fascism – memory – amnesia – silence – Second World War

The perennially shabby carcass of the number seventy bus wound its way across Rome, from Termini railway station to Piazzale Clodio. It might have been a vagary of its itinerary, but the number seventy was always quieter and its passengers older than those of more dynamic services that shared part of its central route. It had little in common, for instance, with the slick and overcrowded

number sixty-four bus, that at Largo Argentina parted ways with its counterpart, triumphantly to ferry its load of expectant tourists across the Tiber towards St. Peter's Square. While a ride on that bus offered little more reminder of the Fascist past than a racist slur against immigrants – and perhaps just a whiff of Lateran Pacts – the number seventy bus hosted debates that were routine both in their regularity and in their political predictability. Now Mussolini's balcony at Piazza Venezia, now the poor manners of laden teenagers refusing their seat to an elderly traveller, now the lateness of the bus itself: regardless of the catalyst, someone would nostalgically recall 'those days' (*quei tempi*), when trains run on time, society shared values of discipline and respect and marshes were drained and bridges built at the apparently indefatigable hands of Benito Mussolini.

I remember those outbursts well, coming home from school in the early 1990s, and well I remember the nods of approval those comments drew, along with the rarer outrage of an antifascist riposte. Yet one does not need evocative anecdotes to know that memories of what Richard Bosworth calls 'the long Second World War' are as present and contested in Italy as anywhere.¹ Instances of the passions those memories still generate are a constant in Italian politics and popular culture, and too many to acknowledge here.² Yet it is worth devoting some attention to Silvio Berlusconi's Holocaust Memorial Day 2013 statement as evidence of the ambiguity and hypocrisy of Italy's dominant memory of the Fascist regime. Upon arriving at an event held at Milan's train station to commemorate the deportation of the city's Jews, the former Prime Minister declared:

It is difficult now to put yourself in the shoes of people who were making decisions at that time [in 1938]. Obviously the government of that time, out of fear that German power might lead to complete victory, preferred to ally itself with Hitler's Germany rather than opposing it. As part of this alliance, there were impositions, including combating and exterminating Jews. The racial laws were the worst fault of Mussolini as a leader, who in so many other ways did well.³

1 Richard Bosworth, *From Auschwitz to Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 1–7.

2 Even as I write, in late April 2014 as the campaign for the European parliamentary elections comes into its own, Silvio Berlusconi has made the news for accusing Germany of not acknowledging the concentration camps. 'Berlusconi comments on WW2 death camps spark German anger,' 'BBC News', last accessed 28 April 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27172045>. Attacking Germany over its Nazi past in election campaigns is a regular tactic of Berlusconi's, which is in itself telling of the sentiments of his constituency.

3 Josephine McKenna, 'Silvio Berlusconi under fire for defending Benito Mussolini,' 'The Telegraph', 27 January 2013, accessed 24 April 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/>

To anyone familiar with the pulse of Italian memory discourses, Berlusconi's history lesson will sound neither outrageous nor surprising. Indeed, as in many of the central tenets of his politics, there was little new in his blaming the war for Fascism's failure as a regime and simultaneously blaming the Germans for the war. It is interesting, however, that much of the incensed reaction by commentators and politicians was directed at Berlusconi's last words: '[Mussolini] in so many other ways did well.' It was much harder to find any challenge to the suggestion that Italy's 1938 Racial Laws had been imposed by Hitler, or any voice daring to suggest that perhaps Italy's colonial violence in Africa might be a worse 'fault' than the Racial Laws.⁴ Interestingly, even as many commentators rebelled against Berlusconi's sully of the memory of the Holocaust, they too exploited that memory, perhaps unwittingly, to silence another, the responsibility for which can much less easily be deferred to other nations.

In Berlusconi's shrewd words and in the reaction they obtained, the coastal metaphor of memory imagined by Marc Augé is revealed in all its elegant efficacy: 'memory is framed by forgetting in the same way that the contours of a shoreline are framed by the sea.'⁵ On the one hand a shoreline representing what we remember (in this case the Racial Laws); on the other the depths where what we have forgotten is buried (the concentration camps built in Libya; the poisonous gases deployed in Ethiopia; the repression of civilians in Yugoslavia; and so on) In the middle, as Jay Winter has argued, is silence: a liminal space where the past is covered but visible and dynamic, constantly threatening to be dredged up or forever washed away.⁶ It is this turquoise frontier that particularly interests us here.

This article analyses the long term trends in postwar Italian cinema's representation and re-interpretation of the Fascist *ventennio*: how has this evolved over time? What has been consistently present and what consistently absent from Italian historical films? This article will demonstrate that, in Italy's

worldnews/silvio-berlusconi/9830157/Silvio-Berlusconi-under-fire-for-defending-Benito-Mussolini.html.

4 A notable exception was Daniele Nahum, Vice-President and Spokesman for Milan's Jewish Community. 'Giornata della Memoria, Berlusconi: "Mussolini fece bene, ma leggi razziali no"; 'Il Fatto Quotidiano', accessed 24 April 2014, <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/01/27/giornata-della-memoria-berlusconi-mussolini-fece-cose-buone-ma-leggi-razziali-no/481289/>.

5 Marc Augé, *Les Formes de l'Oubli* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1998), 4, cited and translated by Jay Winter, 'Thinking about Silence,' in *Shadows of War: a Social History of Silence*, ed. Efrat Ben Ze-ev, Ruth Ginio and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

6 Ibid. 3–31.

case, remembering and forgetting are coherent motions that simultaneously contribute to and are informed by a national self-image centred on victimhood.⁷ Notwithstanding significant variations and serious challenges to this discourse, commonly known as the *italiani brava gente* myth, the narrative of innate Italian decency is the common denominator that ties together the *longue durée* of Italian representations of Fascism, from the emotional intensity of neorealist cinema to the calculating and servile revisionist melodramas of the Berlusconi years.

Cinema is inevitably but one piece of a memory puzzle. In recent years authors such as Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli,⁸ and most recently Filippo Focardi,⁹ have used oral histories, monuments, plaques, political debates and other 'vectors of the past',¹⁰ to apply to Italy a scrutiny that had for the most part eluded it. These authors, among others, have pieced together a complex picture of memory and amnesia, of collective self-absolution but also of surprising levels of awareness, especially in the private sphere. Thus modern Italian collective memories have found their first comprehensive analysis in John Foot's 2009 work, which laid down a framework for Italy's distinctive attitude to memory.¹¹ Not unlike other nation states, Foot argued, Italy experienced 'divided memories', yet perhaps uniquely the country institutionalised counter-memories, rendering them acceptable while blunting their critique of dominant narratives.¹² Building on Portelli and Passerini, Foot's work shows memory as a dynamic and practical historical force in its own right, much closer to Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn's concept of a memory conflicting yet interdependent with history,¹³ than to Pierre Nora's vision of

7 I have explored this topic in more detail in Giacomo Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema since 1945: The Politics and Aesthetics of Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

8 In spite of Mario Isnenghi's impressive edited volumes *I luoghi della memoria* (Bari: Laterza, 1997), the study of Italian collective memory has developed later than in countries such as Germany and especially France. Nevertheless, groundbreaking works of oral history in particular exist, such as Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Torino Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

9 Filippo Focardi, *Il Cattivo Tedesco e il Bravo Italiano: La Rimozione delle Colpe della Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Bari: Laterza, 2014).

10 Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 11.

11 John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

12 Foot, *Italy's Divided Memories*, 1–30.

13 Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, 'Introduction,' *Representations* 26 (1989): 5.

memory as an atavistic antithesis of an antiseptic historiography.¹⁴ The case of postwar Italy seems to justify a view of memory as a historical agent, with real and ongoing practical implications both on the everyday life of Italians and on the social and political frameworks they construct or support.

Within this broader understanding of memory, my own approach to historical cinema places it alongside these other types of primary sources, as a privileged mediator between present and past, and between history and the politics of its commemoration and re-elaboration in the public arena. By relating directly and intimately to the socio-cultural context which produced it, a historical film is a window onto the present, as Pierre Sorlin has analysed it,¹⁵ yet by reconstructing the past for its audiences through a series of representational choices, filmmakers are also entertaining a conversation with the past. My analysis harnesses what I call the double historicity of the historical film by considering in equal measure both the text and the context of its production, as well as its reception, thus proposing a hybrid methodology that owes to and yet revises critically both Sorlin's and Robert Rosenstone's approaches.¹⁶

Black Shirts and Hearts of Gold

At the end of Roberto Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta* [Open City, 1945] the anti-Fascist priest Don Pietro is led away to a firing squad, overseen by a German officer but composed entirely of regular Italian troops enlisted in the armies of the Republic of Salò. As he exits the van that took him to his place of execution, two plain clothes militiamen and another clergyman accompany him to a chair, to which Don Pietro is tied up. They pray together, before an irritated glance from the executioner draws a nod from the second cleric, who sidles off mid-prayer with pragmatic and blasphemous haste. Meanwhile, the children watch from behind a fence, desperate to acknowledge the martyrdom of their partisan-priest. Rossellini cross-edits the children and the Italian soldiers, less than eager to fire on a Catholic priest: the children's whistle is the signal that sanctions the riflemen's mutiny. This does not save the priest but it saves

14 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–25.

15 Pierre Sorlin, 'How to Look at an Historical Film,' in *Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (London: Athlone, 2001), 25–49.

16 Robert Rosenstone, 'History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film,' *The American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1173–1185.

the souls of these nameless Italians who retrieve from the children an ethical compass corroded by fear, deceived by ignorance or dulled by tradition.

Widely recognised both as a new way of thinking about cinema and as an inspired interpretation of Italy's post-Fascist rebirth, *Roma Città Aperta* also represented the genesis narrative of Italian memories of the long Second World War. Elevating the broad anti-Fascist alliance of the provisional governments, Rossellini's narrative of the German occupation of Rome was inclusive, uplifting and sanitised enough to guarantee its reach and longevity, but also carried such ethical and emotional charge as to ensure that such longevity would not be hollow but meaningful. With its seductiveness and its silences, its twin messages of indictment and catharsis, tragedy and hope, *Roma Città Aperta* embodied the coherent paradox of Italian memory: that is, on the one hand, the obsession with Fascism, the war and the Resistance and, on the other hand, the stubborn and absolutory amnesia that shrouds many crucial aspects of that period.

Rossellini constructed an overwhelmingly anti-Fascist Italy, in which a vast majority of flawed but ultimately good Italians contrast a small number of German collaborators motivated by greed (Lauretta), power (the Pietro Caruso-inspired chief of police), drug addiction (Marina) or obtuseness (the black shirts). Rossellini thus established not only a narrative and political canon for the representation of wartime Italy but also an aesthetic one, where Fascist men are ugly, cowardly and idiotic and Fascist women attractive, barren, thin and immodest, while anti-Fascist men are unpretentious, upstanding and determined, and their women rustic, strong and fertile.

The neorealist aesthetics of the working class would quickly become an epiphenomenon of the *italiani brava gente* narrative and help establish it as the dominant discourse in Italian memory: a discourse which would be embraced with relief by the institutions of the state, with enthusiasm by Italian audiences, with pragmatism by film producers and with professionalism and a range of critical reinterpretations by filmmakers. Its cinematic representation has evolved over time both gradually and with sudden accelerations, yet many characteristics of the *brava gente* myth have remained constant through close to seventy years which we can group into four broad periods: resistance, reconstruction, revolution and revisionism.

The first period, the age of resistance, roughly coincided with neorealism and its attempts to bridge armed Resistance and the postwar settlement, which was all too quickly showing signs of amnesty and amnesia. These were years of intense change but also, in ways both symbolic and pragmatic, of restoration, during which the often cited 'values of the Resistance' were enshrined in the new Republican Constitution and simultaneously emptied of their

revolutionary potency. The cinema reflected the expectation of this period, driven largely (but not exclusively) by a communist orthodoxy as yet unsullied by the revelations of Stalin's crimes or the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary. Disillusionment was the hallmark of a second period, the age of reconstruction, in which audiences rediscovered an interest in the Fascist past both satirised and sanitised. This second era was kick-started by the *ex-aequo* Venice Film Festival triumph of Mario Monicelli's *La Grande Guerra* [The Great War, 1959] and Rossellini's *Il Generale della Rovere* [General della Rovere, 1959], which resulted in dozens of Italian historical films made between 1959 and 1963, overwhelmingly on World War Two and the Fascist period.¹⁷ These films constructed a memory of Fascism for the Economic Miracle that owed much aesthetically to neorealism but had lost much of its – political and moral ambition and contained only glimpses of any significant challenge to the dominant *brava gente* discourse.

As ever, neither filmmakers nor their audiences spoke with a univocal voice. Florestano Vancini's *La Lunga Notte del '43* [It Happened in '43, 1963] stood out aesthetically and politically. On the one hand, its exploration of life in provincial Fascist Italy was daunting and uncompromising, constructing a Ferrara full of mean and petty bystanders, where the Fascists are brutal and the anti-Fascists few and downtrodden; on the other hand, in an utterly discouraging finale, Vancini explicitly accused postwar Italy of continuity and contiguity with Fascism.¹⁸ More subtly, traces of Vancini's savage critique were also left elsewhere, for those interested in finding them. In Luigi Comencini's *Tutti a Casa*, for instance, the encounter of Alberto Sordi's character with his deluded father is more introspective than the main character's final catharsis, as it shows that there is indeed no home to go back to but a corrupted one that no longer offers either affection or understanding. At the end of *Il Federale* [The Fascist, 1962], in some ways paradigmatic of the 1960s comic war film, director Luciano Salce abruptly abandons comedy and the fascist caricature of Primo Arcovazzi is nearly lynched by a bloodthirsty Roman mob, whose working class bodies, hideously distorted by hatred, are in fact the same as those of

17 Lino Micciché counts forty-two films in *Cinema Italiano: Gli Anni '60 e Oltre* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1995), 47–49; Maurizio Zinni, however, comes to a total of twenty-five in his *Fascisti di Celluloide* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2010), 102. *La Grande Guerra*, still one of very few Italian films about the First World War, contributed directly to this wave of films about Fascist Italy, both in terms of form – by applying the conventions of Italian-style comedy to a historical topic – and of content – by framing the trope of the cathartic martyrdom of indifferent and selfish but ultimately good Italians.

18 Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema*, 102–104.

Rossellini's Romans years earlier.¹⁹ The examples, though often fleeting and generally ignored by contemporary audiences and critics, are sufficient to argue the films of the age of reconstruction hang on to the *italiani brava gente* narrative but had lost faith in it, almost acknowledging their own hypocrisy, as indeed may be the case in the very title of Giuseppe de Santis's 1964 *Italiani Brava Gente* [Attack and Retreat].

These traces, as well as rare films like *La Lunga Notte del '43*, only foreshadowed a challenge that would have to wait for the end of the decade, the age of revolution, when Bernardo Bertolucci's *Il Conformista* [The Conformist, 1970] and *Strategia del Ragno* [The Spider's Stratagem, 1970] burst onto the scene to elaborate the thirst for memory of the 1968 youth movement. As in other European nations – especially France and West Germany but also Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia – the historical films of the 1970s posed difficult and sometimes unfair questions to a generation of wartime adults whom they considered doubly responsible, first for the rise of fascism and then for the failure to build a new, fairer society after 1945. One should not underestimate the challenge moved to the *brava gente* narrative by works such as De Sica's *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini* [The Garden of the Finzi-Contini, 1970], Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973), Bertolucci's *Novecento* [1900, 1976], and perhaps especially Ettore Scola's *Una Giornata Particolare* [A Special Day, 1977], which remains perhaps the most honest and uncompromising representation of ordinary Italians' support for Fascism. In his story of a gay radio announcer and a downtrodden housewife left alone in a lower middle-class Roman tenement on the day of Hitler's visit to Rome, 6 May 1938, Scola uses the anonymity of the absent crowd to remove all of postwar cinema's stereotypes of the Fascist: the greedy Fascist, the pathetic one, the opportunist and the fanatical Fascist all merge into a mere factual statement of the coincidence of Mussolini's aggressiveness and his popular apotheosis.²⁰

19 For a comprehensive analysis of *Il Federale* see Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema*, 108–125.

20 As Marcus has argued, Scola's *Concorrenza Sleale* [Unfair Competition, 2001] evokes *Una Giornata Particolare*, and together the films explore 'Scola's struggle to come to terms with the significance of 6 May 1938, Hitler's crucial visit to Rome, which Scola himself attended as a young boy. Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 114. However, I would contend that when Scola tried to zoom in on the Italians attending that rally, in his 2001 film and more cursorily in *La Famiglia* [The Family, 1987], the director's critique lost clarity and sharpness, falling back on some of the traditional stereotypes he had expertly avoided in *Una Giornata Particolare*. Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema*, 154–168.

Nevertheless, films such as Scola's remained an exception, and the 1970s films were largely hampered by an excessively rigid reading of class structures and a simultaneous fascination with Freudian psychoanalysis: the former often exonerated the proletariat from otherwise fierce and sweeping critiques of Italian society under Mussolini; the latter oscillated between psychological insight into totalitarianism and gratuitous (and often chauvinist) readings of sexuality as a political motivator. The honesty of Marcel Ophuls's *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* [The Sorrow and the Pity, 1969] or the provocative counter-myth of Louis Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974) were seldom managed in Italy, while the nightmarish visions of collective guilt of Jurgen Syberberg's *Hitler: Ein Film aus Deuthschland* [Hitler: a Film from Germany, 1977], Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel* [The Tin Drum, 1979] or István Szabó's *Mephisto* [1981], for instance, were perhaps only matched by Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 Giornate di Sodoma* [Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom, 1975]. Even a brutal film like *Novecento* narrowed the *brava gente* tropes to the working classes but allowed those tropes to persist.

And so it is that we continue to find those same narrative and aesthetic tropes even in contemporary films, amid a revisionism that flourished with Silvio Berlusconi's rise to power in the late 1990s but that can indeed be traced back to the 1980s.²¹ Many films of this latest period proudly claimed to tackle what they saw as taboo topics, such as summary executions by the Resistance or the motives of the *Repubblichini*, yet all they could muster was a partial revisionism that sought primarily to equate the totalitarian ideologies of Nazism and communism, while reinforcing long-standing paradigms such as the difference between German Nazism and Italian Fascism. So in *Il Sangue dei Vinti* [The Blood of the Defeated, 2008], for instance, Michele Soavi accosts the joint Nazi-Fascist raid on a village – during which the *repubblica* protagonist Lucia attempts to save a child – and the all-Italian, all-communist partisan murder of Lucia's elderly parents (one of whom wheel-chair bound), guilty only of having a Fascist daughter. The *defeated* in Soavi's melodrama are not the *repubblichini*, as in Giampaolo Pansa's study of summary executions of Fascists on which it is based, but all Italians; thus the much-vaunted revision of the nation's history is merely the triumph of a collective narrative of victimhood that mimics and horribly distorts the cathartic whistle of Rossellini's Roman children sixty-three years earlier.

Just as those children were able not only to embody goodness, but also to extend their innocence onto adults through their mere presence,²² so Italian

21 Zinni, *Fascisti di Celluloide*, 262–285.

22 I have discussed elsewhere how Italian cinema's use of children as tools to extend innocence to adults is radically different from trends evident in other European cinemas.

cinema has helped Italian audiences remit the nation's sins by simultaneously shifting responsibility (to the Germans or Mussolini; to the black shirts or to privileged elites) and celebrating acts of courage or humanity as collective heroism. As Filippo Focardi and Lutz Klinkhammer have shown, the *brava gente* narrative suited all sides after the debacle of the Second World War: the Christian Democrats, interested in glossing over Fascism in the name of continuity; and the Communist Party, embarrassed by its early ineffectiveness and keen to stress the popularity of the Resistance movement.²³ In a general atmosphere desperate to forget collective and individual suffering, and move on from collective and individual sins, a collective memory built on amnesia prospered.

Cinema contributed to this remarkable feat of sanitisation by constructing an essence of Italian national identity which we can summarise in five key cornerstones: Catholicism; the humanist tradition; the distrust of rules and rulers; the peasant tradition; and familistic individualism. These pivotal elements interact dynamically, complementing and at times contradicting each other yet coexisting fairly harmoniously to form an irresistible and, crucially, flexible narrative able to be adapted to many different political readings. Italians can thus be represented as immune from totalitarianism for any or all of these reasons: because an intimate Catholic morality forbade them even if outwardly they were keen to conform; because long-standing ideas of civilisation encompassing Roman *pietas* and vague legacies of the Enlightenment and Risorgimento informed them; because a tradition of institutional oppression had vaccinated them against taking their rulers too seriously or following their laws too strictly; because their peasant roots had fed them innate communal values of solidarity and common sense; because 'familism',²⁴ the primacy of the family over the state, carried a survival instinct that was ill-suited to militaristic dictatorships.

While these elements could easily be adapted to regional, ideological and class-based variables, they collectively formed a permanent separation between Italians and their government. The *brava gente* tropes skilfully constructed a wartime Italian society ideally suited to the rise of the Fascist

See also Giacomo Lichtner, 'The age of innocence? Child narratives and Italian Holocaust films,' *Modern Italy* 17 (2012): 197–208.

23 Filippo Focardi and Lutz Klinkhammer, 'The Question of Fascist Italy's War Crimes: The Construction of a Self-acquitting Myth (1943–1948),' *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9 (2004): 330–348.

24 See sociologist Edward Banfield's theories discussed in Jonathan Dunnage, *Twentieth-Century Italy: A Social History* (London: Longman, 2002), 12–18.

dictatorship – because of selfishness, disinterest and opportunism – but also utterly impermeable to its dreams of racial or national supremacy. In doing so these tropes reversed traits that in the nineteenth century had been seen as obstacles to the establishment of a national identity into positive pillars of that same identity: in the process of dealing with the Fascist state and its tragic fallout bigotry became piety; ignorance, wisdom; cowardice, pacifism; selfishness, a critical conscience; opportunism, common sense.

Further proof of the overwhelming convenience and political importance of a memory discourse centred on victimhood, catharsis and an atavistic national morality, is that when filmmakers rejected it censorship often intervened either to curtail such critique or, at the very least, to stop its exportation. Although the censorship and film financing laws passed by the young Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti in 1949 were primarily aimed at thwarting communist critique of the new conservative government, an analysis of the film censorship files reveals that the censors paid particular attention to any film that broke the consensus around a narrative of national victimisation.

The story of Luigi Zampa and Vitaliano Brancati's trilogy *Anni Difficili* [The Difficult Years, 1948], *Anni Facili* [The Easy Years, 1953] and *L'Arte di Arrangiarsi* [The Art of Getting Along, 1954] is paradigmatic. With all three films the authors advanced a conservative and moralistic critique of the Fascist period which centred not on ideology or class but on what they saw as a set of national vices: conformism; clientelism and familism. These were eternal and widespread across all sections of society and therefore linked liberal, Fascist and Christian Democratic Italy: of the murky gang of pathetic petty bourgeois bureaucrats, greedy businessmen, ignorant peasants, social-climbing wives, spoilt boys and silly girls that populate Zampa and Brancati's Italy, perhaps only Aldo Piscitello's brave son and pure daughter-in-law in *Anni Difficili* are spared the authors' fierce critique. That entailed two elements that, interestingly, upset both communist and conservative commentators: first, it showed continuity between the pre- and postwar regimes, equally chastising all ideologies and political parties as exploitative of the common man; second, it blamed Italians and their moral failings for the rise of Fascism and the loss of life of World War Two, chastising a corrupt system that sacrificed the weak while allowing the rich and powerful to adapt to political change.

In 1948, it was barely possible for a censorship office packed with decorated Fascist veterans and headed by Nicola de Pirro, formerly a prominent theorist of Fascist theatre, to accept the ending of *Anni Difficili*, where civil servant Piscitello is purged as a Fascist by the same aristocrat who had forced him years earlier to join the Party or face dismissal. *Anni Difficili* was eventually saved by Andreotti himself, who sensed the populist value of Zampa and

Brancati's poetics of the common man as an essentially conservative critique. The Undersecretary of State for culture defended the film in Parliament, praising the 'remarkable sense of measure and light touch' of a story that provided 'a rare occasion in which each of us, be they Fascist, anti-Fascist or a-Fascist can feel part of [the same] experience.'²⁵ Crucial though it was, Andreotti's intervention could not spare *Anni Difficili* the snide hand-written note that is still visible on the reverse of the original censorship visa eventually issued by reluctant but dutiful bureaucrats: 'The film has been considered by the Fourth Commission [of the Office for Cinematographic Revision] which did not take any decision. By order of the Director General [de Pirro], it has been admitted to public circulation. 25 September 1948. And for exportation? I should think not! [sic] At least that.'²⁶

Zampa and Brancati's subsequent efforts, *Anni Facili* and *L'Arte di Arrangiarsi*, suffered similar fates. Both films faced cuts and rewrites, and *Anni Facili* was briefly seized when Marshall Rodolfo Graziani sued it for slander due to a scene showing Fascist veterans partying at a castle outside Rome.²⁷ Nevertheless, it was not the caricature of nostalgic black shirts that pricked the censors' sensitivity but the suggestion of continuity between Fascist and democratic Italy: it was fine to represent the die-hard Fascist apologists because they were few and ridiculous; it was much more subversive, however, to show respectable businessmen adapting to their new surroundings by corrupting postwar cadres as easily as they had done Fascist ones.

This was not a treatment reserved for Zampa and Brancati, although the latter did die awaiting the Ministry's response to the third revised version of the typescript he had submitted for *L'Arte di Arrangiarsi*. The *cause célèbre* of the 1950s was the script of *L'Armata S'Agapò* [The Fallen in Love Brigade], for which authors Renzo Renzi and Guido Aristarco were arrested and tried by a military court for dishonouring the armed forces.²⁸ In most cases, however,

25 Giulio Andreotti's answer to a Parliamentary question by Senators Giuseppe Magliano, Mario Cingolani, Giovanni Persico and Emilio Battista, 27 November 1948, *Atti Parlamentari del Senato della Repubblica, Discussioni III, 27 October-21 December 1948* (Roma, 1948), 4020–4023.

26 Censorship Visa 4481 (reverse), 25 September 1948, *Anni Difficili* folder; files of the Ufficio di Revisione Cinematografica, Direzione Generale per lo Spettacolo, Ministero dei Beni Culturali, Rome. The note was signed by Gianni De Tommasi, like De Pirro a *squadrista* and littoral scarf, who had been hired back as chief of division at the Office of Cinematographic Revision in 1947.

27 Zinni, *Fascisti di Celluloide*, 61–62.

28 See Renzo Renzi, 'Il processo s'agapò,' in *Storia del Cinema Italiano. Vol. VIII: 1949–1953*, ed. Luciano De Giusti (Venezia: Marsilio, 2003), 70–71, 567–580.

ensorship was subtle, often preventive, and left little or no trace:²⁹ the censorship visa awarded to Carlo Lizzani's adaptation of Vasco Pratolini's *Cronache di Poveri Amanti* [Chronicles of Poor Lovers, 1954], for example, still carries another hand-written note by zealous division head Gianni De Tommasi, this time a strand of paper held together by increasingly precarious office glue: 'One otherwise reminds [the Ministry] of the necessity that such films ought not to be released overseas.'³⁰

Nevertheless, for the most part Italian filmmakers did not require any stronger incentive than the market to exercise self-censorship and make it unscathed through the institutional process, and press reception of more anti-conformist films demonstrates public opinion's a remarkable resilience in ignoring any cues for analysis and introspection. For instance, the aforementioned brutal ending of *Il Federale* was utterly ignored by public and critics;³¹ similarly, a stray sentence referring to Italian deployment of poison gases in Ethiopia in De Sica's *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini* left no mark in the film's reception.³² At home there was little or no call for introspection, and then only in marginal segments of the left. Overseas, audiences had fallen in love with Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren as the paradigmatic Italian couple: they were quite at ease with a wartime equivalent of their melodramatic charm that would later take shape in the vulgar yet sophisticated Captain Corelli, mandolin-playing, opera-singing, wine-loving and war-loathing invader of Greek soil.

Traces, Silences, Absences

What emerges from the interaction of the cinematic text and its institutional and public reception is a picture made of recurrent tropes and recurrent absences: on the one hand what was consistently shown; on the other, what was consistently hidden, forgotten or deliberately ignored. Having examined the former, the rest of this article will examine the latter, and show how harmoniously the two coexisted as a single Italian imaginary.

29 Mino Argentieri, *La Censura nel Cinema Italiano* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1974), 152–157.

30 Censorship Visa 15814, 22 March 1954, *Cronache di Poveri Amanti* folder; files of the Ufficio di Revisione Cinematografica, Direzione Generale per lo Spettacolo, Ministero dei Beni Culturali, Rome.

31 Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema*, 120–125.

32 This incident occurs during Giorgio's train journey to France. He overhears two strangers exchanging the lines: 'Is it true we've used poison gases in Ethiopia?' 'Of course it's true.'

Taken as a collective text, Italian cinema about Fascism has deconstructed the timeline of the Fascist *ventennio* to fabricate a virtual alternative: it begins in 1922, when a violent minority forced itself upon an innocent, or at worst acquiescent, majority; it skips neatly to 1938, when Mussolini's alliance with Nazi Germany forced Italy to institutionalise anti-Semitism and ultimately join the Second World War; it touches on its worst military defeats, to empathise with helpless soldiers sent to die on foreign soil, for a foreign cause, under a foreign and contemptuous ally; it lingers on the armistice of 8 September 1943, to show Italians abandoned by an elitist and incompetent government; it dwells on the last eighteen months of the war, celebrating the Resistance as a national catharsis in which – German brutality is the culmination of a narrative centred on victimhood. Deliberately partial and simplistic, this sanitised timeline highlights the symbiotic relationship between visible and invisible in Italian memory: it ignores the Concordat and Mussolini's elevation to 'the man that Providence sent us',³³ for instance, or his apotheosis at the proclamation of the Empire in 1936, along with anything that would spoil the cosy picture of Italians as *brava gente*.

The deconstruction and reassembling of Fascist Italy's experiences has been as much geographical as it was temporal. The South, for instance, has been represented less often than the Centre-North, in spite of interesting films such as de Sica's *La Ciociara* [Two Women, 1960], Nanny Loy's *Le Quattro Giornate di Napoli* [The Four Days of Naples, 1962], Lina Wertmüller's *Pasqualino Settebellezze* [Seven Beauties, 1975] or Francesco Rosi's *Cristo si è Fermato a Eboli* [Christ Stopped at Eboli, 1979]. The overwhelming interest in the Resistance, fought mostly in the Centre-North, partly explains this, nevertheless the result is that, with the exception of Zampa and Brancati's Sicilian sagas, Southern society under Fascism remains today largely unexplored and stereotypical.

The border regions of the North and North-East leave a more gaping hole in the geography of Italy's cinematic memory. If the South was liberated too soon to be reborn in the ritual cleansing of partisan warfare, the far North was liberated too late: the war there was both too 'civil' and too 'uncivil' to fit the dominant narrative. Perhaps the bleak brutality of the final episode of Rossellini's *Paisà* [Paisan, 1946] inadvertently buried not only the dead but also their memory: Giuliana Minghelli has recently shown how the ending of that

33 Pope Pius XI, 'Allocuzione di S.S. Pio XI ai professori e agli studenti dell'Università Cattolica del sacro Cuore di Milano,' *Vogliamo Anzitutto*, 13 febbraio 1929. 'The Holy See,' accessed 25 April 2014, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/speeches/documents/hf_p-xi_spe_19290213_vogliamo-anzitutto_it.html.

film, with the Po river's murky waters closing over the partisan's corpse, was a rare moment of mourning unassuaged by hope.³⁴ The civil war would be largely taboo thereafter, with only occasional glimpses of its full extent in films such as Giuliano Montaldo's *Tiro al Piccione* [Pigeon Shoot, 1962] and Vancini's *La Lunga Notte del '43*.

Obfuscating the border regions meant conveniently silencing the *repubblichini*'s experiences, yet it was primarily Italy's linguistic and ethnic minorities that were robbed of agency and voice. French-speakers in Val d'Aosta, German-speakers in South Tirol and the Slavic minority of the North-East, all of whom were among the first to be persecuted by the Fascist regime, still await to see their stories told. It is a damning indictment of the hypocrisy of Italy's dominant memories that, when the films of the Berlusconi era brought the North-East to the screen, their much-vaunted revisionism completely ignored Italian crimes against its ethnic minorities. Instead, state-funded historical dramas focused on isolated instances of communist crimes against Catholic partisans (Renzo Martinelli's *Porzûs*, 1997) or on Yugoslav ethnic cleansing of Italians in the immediate aftermath of the war (Michele Soavi's *Il Cuore nel Pozzo* [The Heart in the Well, 2005]), revising little and certainly not the *brava gente* myth. *Il Cuore nel Pozzo* is particularly pernicious: on the one hand, it meticulously represents Italy's presence in Yugoslavia as a civilising mission, with main characters as diverse as a doctor, a teacher, a priest, a child and a deserter; on the other hand, its representation of the Yugoslav partisans flirts with the most heinous propaganda about Asian hordes, picturing drunk, bloodthirsty, sexual predators offset only by one good Slav, Anya, who is blonde, blue-eyed and evidently already civilised.

Anya, silent and tokenistic, and Lucia in *Il Sangue dei Vinti*, are just the latest incarnation of a long line of voiceless female characters written by, and largely for, men. This is not say that there have not been outstanding female characters, such as Antonietta in Scola's *Una Giornata Particolare*, or that there was not from the start a female element to the *brava gente* narrative. On the contrary, stereotypes of femininity have often complemented the broader concept of Italian victimisation, while narrative paradigms of corruption and sexual temptation have played into simplistic yet popular moral dichotomies. Mothers, wives, lovers and prostitutes have abounded, their meanings and uses diverse and wide-ranging yet functional first, to defining the men around them rather than themselves, and second, to the overall discourse of Italian memory.

34 Giuliana Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film: Cinema Year Zero* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 39–49.

Men's experiences took a dominant role, then, yet their voice too faltered as it approached politically sensitive aspects of masculinity under Fascism: namely sex and war. The representation of the former oscillated between two paradigms: first, the effeminate Fascist man, boastful and insecure, launched by neorealism and perfected by dozens of early 1960s comedies; and second, the repressed Fascist prevalent since the 1970s, for whom politics was a tool in the repression or fulfilment of sexual fantasies. Clerici in Bertolucci's *Il Conformista* and Attila in the same author's *Novocento* are paradigmatic of a host of characters, while Marcello Mastroianni in *Una Giornata Particolare* still stands out for the scriptwriters' refusal to apportion a facile symbolic meaning to his homosexuality. A separate point may be made for the character of Pino Barilari in *La Lunga Notte del '43*, who functions rather as a symbolic link between the 1960s and 1970s' models of representing Fascist masculinity: he was rendered impotent and lame by syphilis contracted from a prostitute he was forced to have sex with by his own comrades on the return journey from the 1922 March on Rome.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat has written about Alberto Lattuada's *Il Bandito* [The Bandit, 1946] as an example of neorealism's grappling with a post-fascist aesthetic of masculinity that would upend the regime's obsession with virility.³⁵ Lattuada's clever use of screen heartthrob Amedeo Nazzari as a moral casualty of Fascism's alpha male stereotype indeed belongs to a broader discourse of social regeneration, which infuses the film from its very opening. The film starts with a train of Italian war veterans returning home and four consecutive shots of chalk graffiti on the train's exterior walls that leave no doubt as to Lattuada's point: 'Long live Italy'; 'Long live the USA'; 'Down with Hitler' with a swastika and the picture of hanged man; and 'Wife wanted, even second-hand', complete with illustration. Punctuated with ominous close-up shots of black smoke issuing from the locomotive, a veteran looking through a wire mesh and dozens of bodies sleeping on the floor of an overcrowded wagon, the home-bound train reframes the men that Fascist propaganda had last shown cheerfully boarding similar trains in the opposite direction. Then, as the men disembark, the picture is completed with an explicit political rebranding: an un-athletic yet cheerful veteran holds a copy of the Socialist Party newspaper *Avanti!*, folded yet clearly recognisable. In a masterfully-composed sequence, Lattuada begins a process that, by the film's end, will blend the concepts of hero and casualty of war, yet he also ensures that Republican Italy's new aesthetic of masculinity will recycle many aspects of the *brava gente* narrative. Although

35 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'Unmaking the Fascist Man: Masculinity, Film and the Transition from Dictatorship', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10 (2005): 336–365.

almost unique in concentrating specifically on war veterans, Lattuada's film is another example of Italian cinema's tendency simultaneously to redeem and remove uncomfortable legacies from the public discourse.

By the time Mussolini hanged feet up from improvised gallows at Piazzale Loreto, Italian troops had employed conventional and non-conventional weapons to kill about a million people in many wars of aggression in Africa and Europe,³⁶ yet only by virtue of their defeats have Italian soldiers been allowed to share in the nation's catharsis. On the one hand, Italian war films have traditionally used a tragicomic language that largely avoided fighting, transposing to the army the *commedia all'italiana's* satire of Italy's society and its regional idiosyncrasies. On the other hand, Italy's few genuine war films, especially in the mid-1950s and since 2000, have narrowed their narrative settings in astonishingly consistent ways that can only be explained with the self-imposed silence around Italy's role as aggressor. By a remarkably effective metonymic device, the Nazi massacre of Italian troops at Cephallonia came to represent Italy's occupation of Greece, Russia's frozen steppes Italy's invasion of the Soviet Union, and the sandy graves of El Alamein half a century of Italian presence in Africa.

Regardless of the films' tone and style, killing is the crucial absence of Italy's cinematic memory. Although it is understandably complicated to study an absence, evidence of this particular silence is both abundant and consistent throughout the postwar period. Most recently, it was on display in Riccardo Milani's *Cefalonia* [2005], Monicelli's *Le Rose del Deserto* [The Roses of the Desert, 2006] and *Il Cuore nel Pozzo*, but perhaps most interestingly in Enzo Monteleone's *El Alamein: La Linea del Fuoco* [El Alamein, the Line of Fire, 2002]. This was meant to represent a new generation of war film: a gritty, realist, uncompromising Italian equivalent of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998). Pointing to Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbour* (2001) as 'the pornography of war', Monteleone set his sights on recapturing: 'the spirit of the soldiers on the front line, the everyday problems in a siege situation. . . . to be right there in the trenches with them, to experience their fear of living on a razor's edge, between life and death.'³⁷

36 Richard Bosworth, 'A Country Split in Two? Contemporary Italy and Its Usable and Unusable Pasts,' *History Compass* 4 (2006): 1096.

37 Enzo Monteleone, 'Filming History', a lecture delivered for Sources 2: Stimulating Outstanding Resources for Creative European Screenwriting, Sorrento, 12 November 2005, 4; 'Sources 2', accessed 25 April 2014, <http://www.sources2.de/fileadmin/medien/pdf/Enzo%20Monteleone%202005.pdf>.

Set among the soldiers of the Pavia division in the days preceding the battle, *El Alamein* is based on the contrast between an idealistic young volunteer, Private Serra, and a hardened and disillusioned veteran, Sergeant Rizzo. The film is certainly graphic – it begins with Rizzo collecting the ear of a comrade blown up by a stray shell – and thirst, sand and boredom feature prominently in the soldiers' lives. Unlike most Italian films, Monteleone lingers on the soldiers' sense of duty and professionalism, even before their bravery, yet he is unable to carry that acknowledgment through to its obvious consequence: the dispassionate killing of the enemy. Hence, while British soldiers shoot and kill even stretcher-bearers, their Italian counterparts fire only after repeated warnings and in self-defence. Furthermore, their innate humanity stretches past the respect for fellow human beings. In a surreal scene, the retreating Italian troops, overwhelmed by the enemy and abandoned by their own officers, meet a convoy carrying a white stallion: Mussolini's horse optimistically made ready for the Duce's triumphant return to liberated Benghazi. Starving and furious at the brazen pomposity of their incompetent leaders, the soldiers nevertheless set the animal free.³⁸

Monteleone's illusion of hyper-realism struck an unsurmountable obstacle in a familiar fantasy of Italians as 'the not so bad guys', as he eloquently explained to students of a European Union scriptwriting course:

Unfortunately the Germans are the really bad guys, because they were the Nazis, they had the concentration camps, and they did the Final Solution. The Italians were the 'not so bad guys.' We have to make a difference between the fascists, the fascist regime and normal people, because not all Italians were really fascist. . . . The real bad guys were the generals and the politicians. The thousands of soldiers who died were normal people, ordinary people who only wanted to go back home.³⁹

Brazenly inconsistent in its application of complexity to Italians but not to Germans Monteleone's view is nevertheless unsurprising, especially coming from one of the scriptwriters of Gabriele Salvatores's *Mediterraneo* (1991), the Oscar-winning film that more than any other cemented in modern times the rose-tinted representation of the Italian army. Indeed, like Berlusconi's words earlier in the article, Monteleone's words spell the familiar reading of a

38 This is not an isolated instance: in Guy Hamilton's Anglo-Italian film *The Best of Enemies* (1961), starving Italian troops refuse to kill a gazelle they had adopted as regimental pet.

39 Monteleone, 'Filming History,' 6.

nation and its people, using the Germans as an equally familiar reference point for Italian goodness. It is essentially the same reading that a completely different filmmaker, Mario Monicelli, gave in *Le Rose del Deserto's* voyeuristic representation of passive African princesses and Italian 'kids who went to Africa thinking they were off on . . . a romantic-exotic adventure . . . and instead found themselves in a story of fire, sand, hunger, thirst and of total lack of preparation.'⁴⁰

The aversion to representing killing was not the result of a post-fascist allergy to nationalism and warfare, but of an absolutory dominant memory that has equally enthralled left and right. Like their more recent equivalents, the 1950s war films provide clear evidence of the ecumenical qualities of the *brava gente* myth. Films such as *Carica Eroica* [Heroic Charge, Francesco De Robertis, 1952], *Divisione Folgore* [Folgore Division, Duilio Coletti, 1955] and *El Alamein: Deserto di Gloria* [Tanks of El Alamein, Guido Malatesta, 1958] were Italian cinema's response to the British and American war film, then in its golden age, and were generally regarded as right-wing. *Carica Eroica* in particular drew the ire of communist MPs, outraged at seeing Soviet soldiers as the enemy.⁴¹ In relation to their Anglo-American counterparts, however, these forgotten Italian films suffered from a cognitive dissonance that has made them as uncomfortable for commentators as they were popular amongst audiences: how could they celebrate the certainty of the soldiers' righteousness if their cause was that of the Axis?

Nevertheless, it is revealing to notice the absence of killing even in films that openly heralded Italian bravery, patriotism and sacrifice, couched in conservative values including the supremacy of the nation over the individual and the family. On paper at least, these films should have collectively either represented a counter-memory openly nostalgic of Fascism or removed the *brava gente* alibi, confronting Italians with the consequences of their nationalism. Instead, skilful if improbable scriptwriting and the magic of editing left little more than a melodramatic equilibrium between winking at nostalgia and embracing the new order through a universal message of Christian compassion. As *Divisione Folgore's* final voice-over recites: 'The roar of the battle has died down in the silence of peace, which renders all hate useless and vain. But may these ordered lines of crosses in a desert no longer deserted be examples

40 Mario Monicelli, 'Interview with Francesca Angeleri', in *Le Rose del Deserto*, DVD (Dolmen Home Video, 2007), bonus features, 2'40"-3'00".

41 Pietro Grifone and Giorgio Amendola, 'Interrogazione al Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri', 3 March 1953, *Atti Parlamentari della Camera dei Deputati, Legislatura I 1948/53, Discussioni XXXIV, 1953* (Roma: 1953), 46179.

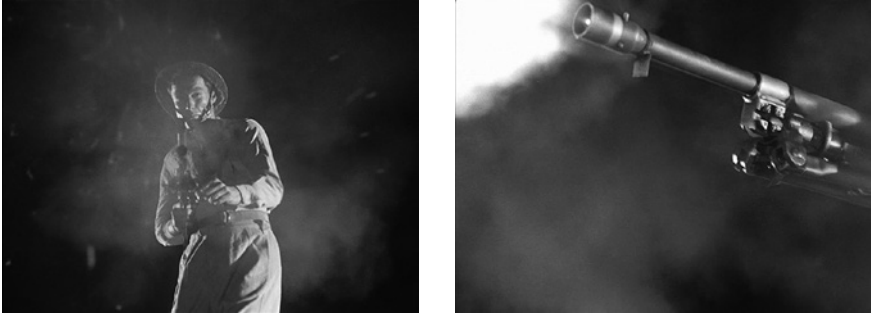


FIGURE 1 *Framing the act of killing: consecutive shots of Duilio Coletti's *Divisione Folgore*.*

of heroism, of sacrifice and of duty: a warning from those who lived to those who live so that humanity may find anew the gift of love in the sign of Christ.'

In this tightrope act, the Italians fight tooth and nail for their country yet Fascism is not once mentioned; they fire mortar shells but their ordnance remain unexploded; they daringly bring down tanks, yet the burnt out vehicle's metal hide conceals the dead and thus protects not British personnel but the innocence of Italian viewers. Consistently, across more than one film, Italians shoot but the enemy's death remains a consequence best left to the imagination. In this respect, a sequence of Coletti's *Divisione Folgore* provides the (almost literal) smoking gun: during a night-time raid Italian troops ambush a British patrol; despite a warning, the British refuse to be disarmed and shoot first, drawing Italian fire in return; bayonet in hand, an Italian soldier leaps into a trench only to find his enemy already wounded; struck by his agony, the Italian withdraws his weapon and gives water to the British soldier, holding him as he exhales his last breath. The plot alone, with its homage to the crater scene in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930), already hints strongly at the filmmaker's point. But it is the editing that seals it: not once but twice in a forty-second sequence, Coletti cross-edits the British soldier firing his tommy gun, shot from below in a three-quarters frame from the knees up, with a close up of the barrel of the answering Italian machine gun (Figure 1). Italians can fight back and kill after all, just as long as they are not seen to do so.

The Unbroken Mirror

Thus Italian war crimes in Africa and beyond remain ignored in popular culture, even though historiography has long broken that particular taboo, especially through the work of Nicola Labanca and Angelo Del Boca for Africa,

and Davide Rodogno and Paolo Rumiz for the former Yugoslavia.⁴² In popular culture, it would take a foreign film, Moustapha Akkad's *Lion of the Desert* (1981), to provide an explicit representation of Italian crimes against humanity in Africa, not least because of the virtual invisibility surrounding those rare films that looked at Italy's brutal legacy in the African colonies, such as Giorgio Moser's *Violenza Segreta* [Secret Violence, 1963]. In a global context, Akkad's film was in many ways unremarkable; in the context of Italy's self-representation however, it performed the revolutionary task of applying to Italian troops in Libya the cinematic aesthetics audiences normally associate with Nazi Germans. Italians murder, forcibly remove populations from their environment, organise concentration camps, burn villages and rape in their brutal repression of Omar Al-Mukhtar's Libyan guerrilla. Yet it is their conceited, gratuitous attitude to violence that creates a link to the Nazi cinematic paradigm. The process of murderous deliberation is epitomised especially well by one chilling scene, where an officer decimates the male inhabitants of a village: he weaves across the ranks of lined-up men killing every tenth, then stops behind a child and his father; he lingers, pondering which one to execute, then finally shoots the father.

Except for a tiny minority, the Italian public has never seen this film because of a frighteningly efficient censorship by inertia that effectively boycotted it without censoring even a photogram or formally banning it, contrary to a common claim.⁴³ Indeed, *Lion of the Desert* was partly shot in Italy, and even benefited from tax incentives to do so. Quite simply, however, no Italian distributor would purchase the film's rights, and consequently no application was ever filed for a censorship visa. Thus when right-wing MPs asked for a ban of the film,⁴⁴ or socialist MPs lamented its perceived censorship,⁴⁵ government

42 See Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani Brava Gente?* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 2005); Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'Espansione Coloniale Italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Davide Rodogno, *Il Nuovo Ordine Mediterraneo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); Paolo Rumiz, *Maschere per un massacro – Quello che non abbiamo voluto sapere della guerra in Jugoslavia* (Roma: Feltrinelli, 2011).

43 See for example Clarissa Clò, 'Mediterraneo Interrupted: Perils and Potentials of Representing Italy's Occupations in Greece and Libya Through Film,' *Italian Culture* 27, no. 2 (2009): 104–105.

44 Cesare Pozzo, 'Interrogazione al Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri e al Ministro per il Turismo e per lo Spettacolo,' 11 June 1980, *Atti Parlamentari del Senato della Repubblica, Discussioni VIII, 15 March–18 July 1980*, 7260–7263.

45 Agostino Spataro and Giovanni Giadresco, 'Interrogazione al Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri e al Ministro per il Turismo e per lo Spettacolo,' 21 January 1982, *Atti Parlamentari della Camera dei Deputati, VIII Legislatura, Discussioni XXXIX, 21 January–4 February 1982*, 39379.

officials could justifiably reject both challenges. The status quo still endures, and *Lion of the Desert* has only been screened at a couple of film festivals in the 1980s, in Trento (where the showing was stopped by police) and Montecatini, and then on Sky TV on 11 June 2009, to mark Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's visit to Rome.⁴⁶ After thirty years the film's capacity to create controversy had dimmed, but it is interesting to note that even when the Montecatini film festival successfully screened the film in 1983 the reaction was muted, as relativism came to the rescue of commentators: the film was not anti-Italian but rather a general anti-colonialist discourse, against Western wars such as those in Vietnam and Algeria.⁴⁷

The uneventful and overall underwhelming story of *Lion of the Desert's* 'censorship by inertia' is light-years away from the decade-long controversy that accompanied Marcel Ophuls's *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, for whom the expression 'censorship by inertia' was coined.⁴⁸ In the French case, a film interpreted and channelled a reasonably widespread and very vocal demand for introspection which a boycott could only foster further; in the Italian case, on the contrary, there was no such demand and no-one invested emotionally or culturally in a film that was not only foreign but also alien. Only for that reason could an informal boycott of the film succeed to such an extent. Discussing Ophuls's film, Henri Rousso used the image of a breaking mirror to describe the emersion into the mainstream of the memory of Vichy from the selective discourses of Gaullists and communists.⁴⁹ Italy's mirror remains unbroken, despite the odd crack and a distinct loss of shine.

Across most of Europe, the memories of the long Second World War experienced significant challenges, usually coinciding with generational or political upheaval: the May days and the demise of De Gaulle in France; the election of Willy Brandt in West Germany; the collapse of the USSR in Eastern Europe. In Italy the chance for a definitive revision of the *brava gente* myth should have coincided with the corruption scandals which swept away the postwar political status quo in the early 1990s. Why this did not happen, and how the Berlusconi anomaly replaced the Christian Democratic one, leaving the *brava gente* largely unaffected, is perhaps another story. It is telling, however,

46 'Il leone del deserto arriva su SKY Cinema,' 10 June 2009, 'SKY Cinema', accessed 25 April 2014, http://cinema.sky.it/cinema/news/2009/06/08/il_leone_del_deserto_sky_cinema.html.

47 Andreina De Tommasi, 'Fa ancora paura l'ombra di Graziani inviato dal Duce,' *La Repubblica*, 7 July 1983, 16.

48 Colette Godard, 'Entretien avec Marcel Ophuls,' *Le Monde*, 18 August 1981.

49 Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 98–131.

that when Lower House Speaker Luciano Violante delivered his landmark accession speech, in 1996, he encouraged a revision of Italy's wartime memory based not on national introspection but on acknowledging the perspective of the *repubblichini*;⁵⁰ Violante said nothing at all of the need to remember Africa, even though he was born in 1944 in a British POW camp at Dire Dawa, in Ethiopia, where his communist father had been exiled in the 1930s.

The story of Italian cinema's engagement with the Fascist past goes hand in hand with that of the society whose memories, contested but consistent, it has interpreted, constructed and very occasionally deconstructed. It is the story of a nation for whom memory has been intimately about national self-definition and for whom self-definition has centred on forgetting and remembering selectively. The canon of Italian cinema about Fascism reveals a coherent relationship between memory and amnesia, mediated by silences and by traces scattered here and there, available to those who wanted to see but sufficiently ambiguous not to disturb those who sought not to see. This harmonious coexistence of memory and amnesia raises two questions that ought to be studied further: the first, about the role of Italian cinema in domesticating the Italian anomalies, by representing them only so that they may be ignored; and the second, about the relationship between Italy and the rest of Europe, where the memory of traumatic events is at least as contested but perhaps less closely tied to conceptions of national identity, and therefore less hypocritical. As far as Italy is concerned, however, it is hard now to envisage society ever investing into a self-analysis of its increasingly distant past that would eschew the *brava gente* narrative and thus come, in time, to a fulfilling if painful closure.

50 Luciano Violante, 9 May 1996, 'Camera dei Deputati', accessed 30 April 2014, http://leg15.camera.it/chiosco.asp?content=/_dati/leg13/lavori/stenografici/sed001/s100.htm&position=Ufficiodi_presidenza\Composizione_della_Camera_della_xiiii_legislatura&source=/organiparlamentari/ufficiopresidenza/leg13/index_violante.asp?content=/organiparlamentari/ufficiopresidenza/leg13/presidente_Violante.asp.